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A GIFT

BEYOND PRICE

by

GLORIA FRY

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CHAPTER ONE

Gary Mitchell waited impatiently in the main transporter room of Starbase One. The Enterprise was due at any time now. He recalled the subspace message he had received from Jim. 'I am unable to return to Earth. My orders are to pick up a consignment of Dilithium crystals from Starbase One. Join the ship there. We will arrive in two solar days. We may not return this close to Earth for years.'

The message was clear. If he was not at Starbase One, he would not get onto the Enterprise. He would be assigned elsewhere.

He reflected on the months he had spent in Regen. Jim had recovered more quickly and had already had his trial run as Captain of the Enterprise while he, Gary, had been left behind. He paced the floor. What had happened during that time? How had Jim managed without him? What was it going to be like, being First Officer of a Starship?

"Mitch, that will not bring the ship any faster," said the tall, blonde woman who waited by the transporter console. She too was assigned to the Enterprise where she was taking up the post of Chief Nursing Officer.

"Chris," Gary murmured apologetically. "I can't help it. After all this inactivity, I need to get going. I need some action."

Christine Chapel smiled. She was fond of Mitchell, but found him abrasive, even arrogant, and often chauvinistic; but he could also be very charming. However, he was constantly compared to his friend, the more diplomatic, attractive, charismatic Jim Kirk. Inevitably he walked in his shadow. Kirk's rise had been meteoric. His natural command abilities, his gift for diplomacy, his intuitive feel for seeing all sides of a difficult situation, his bravery and heroism, made him the perfect choice for Starship Command, despite his relative youth. Chapel admired Kirk immensely and was looking forward to serving on his ship.

The transporter chief turned to them. "Enterprise is hailing. Prepare to beam up in fifteen minutes."

Mitchell grinned up at Chapel. "This is it."

Chapel returned the smile, but privately wondered how Mitchell was going to take the news that he was not, after all, to be First Officer. Her new Chief, Leonard McCoy, had been in private communication with her, and had told her the situation. She had not approved at first that Mitchell should go aboard unknowing, but after some thought she realised that Captain Kirk wanted to break the news in his own way. Perhaps he wanted to tell Mitchell

personally, not via the impersonal route of subspace radio. He was Mitchell's oldest friend, surely he knew what he was doing.

As the transporter effect left them, Mitchell bounded from the platform expecting to see Kirk there.

McCoy stepped forward. "Welcome aboard."

"Where is Jim?" Mitchell asked.

McCoy glanced at Chapel. "He's in his quarters."

Mitchell made for the door.

"Gary," McCoy called. "Jim has a heavy load. We are warping out as soon as the crystals are safely aboard. They are needed urgently at Bradley's colony."

"I am his best friend," Mitchell said, a little peeved. "He could have met me."

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. "He is a Starship commander now, responsible for over 400 people. Don't think you will get special treatment because you are an old friend."

Mitchell pulled a face. "Okay, Doc, I get your drift, but I only saved his life, didn't I?"

He left them staring after him. Chapel moved to the Doctor's side. "He presumes much, doesn't he?" she said.

McCoy nodded. "He is too arrogant for his own good, but Jim is more than a match for him." He paused for a second. "But even Jim will find it tough to tell him he's not to be First Officer."

Curiosity made Chapel ask about the Science Officer; she had never been in close contact with a Vulcan before. There were so few of them in Starfleet any more.

A wry smile crossed the Doctor's face. "He's a strange one, is Mr. Spock. I'm afraid that he and I did not get off to a very good start. It was my fault, I have to admit that. I don't understand him, neither does Jim. Yet the crew who knew him from before have the deepest respect for him." He shrugged, put a fatherly arm around Chapel, and added, "Maybe I don't know how to talk to the 'genius' type, especially an alien genius. I'm just a plain old country doctor."

"Yes, Doctor," she said with a disbelieving look. A 'plain old country doctor' McCoy was not....

Mitchell made his way to the Captain's quarters, taking in the sights of the giant Starship. She was beautiful, just what he and Jim had always dreamed about. His eyes followed the shapely figures of the female crewmembers. He was going to enjoy himself aboard this ship. He and Jim would have the best of times here.

James T. Kirk, Starship Captain, sat at his desk staring up at his First Officer. "I appreciate your taking the time to explain these facts to me, Mr. Spock, but I am not a scientific specialist. You lost me after a few sentences."

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow. "Lost you, Captain?"

Kirk sighed deeply. He was beginning to get frustrated at his First Officer with his literal interpretation of the language. Surely the Vulcan, who had spent years among Humans, understood such expressions. He held on to his temper. He would need all his wits to deal with Mitchell, who was bound to be here soon.

"I mean, I understood you at the beginning, but the scientific terms you used later were incomprehensible to me. You will have to explain it in simpler terms."

The Vulcan clasped his hands behind his back. "Very well, sir."

Kirk sighed again. The Science Officer was giving him an inferiority complex - always correct, always meticulous, always precise, using language he was totally unable to understand. How could he command such a being? The buzzer sounded, and not without a certain relief, he said, "Enter."

The doors slid open, and in strode Gary Mitchell, large as life, his face alight with a smile that Kirk had once thought he would never see again. He stood up quickly, rushed over to him, grinning widely and exclaimed, "Gary!!!!"

"Jim!" Mitchell cried, and a moment later both men were hugging one another hard, pounding each other's backs, swinging each other around, laughing, grinning, almost crying in their joy at being together again.

Spock took a step back. He had never, in all his years in Starfleet, seen such an emotional display. Captain Pike had been quiet, introverted, the nearest a Human could be to a Vulcan. Number One had been assured, confident. The crew had taken their lead from their commanding officers, and had mostly kept emotional behaviour private. Certainly they knew better than to assault a Vulcan with such outbursts. He considered leaving, but rejected it. He had not been dismissed, he had been trying to explain his theory to the Captain at the time of the interruption, so he would have to wait. He exerted more control, and succeeded in shutting out the waves of emotions emanating from the Humans.

"You look terrific!" Kirk exclaimed, holding Mitchell back to drink in the sight of him. "Do you feel all right?"

Mitchell smiled happily. "All fit and raring to go, Jim!" He studied his friend. "The Captain's uniform suits you."

Kirk chuckled. "Thank you."

He squeezed Mitchell's arms, then stepped back. "It is so good to see you."

"I can't tell you how glad I am to see you, Jim. It's been too long."

Kirk nodded, suddenly serious now. "A long recovery, Gary, and I never did have the chance to thank you properly for saving my life. I will never be able to repay you for that."

Mitchell laughed, changing the serious turn of the conversation. "Oh, I'll think of something."

Kirk did not respond to that remark; he had suddenly remembered that his First Officer still stood there by the desk, and Mitchell did not yet know of the situation. He straightened his shirt, searched for some dignity, and half turning to the Vulcan, motioned him forward.

"Mr. Spock, may I introduce you to an old friend of mine, Gary Mitchell." Spock inclined his head slightly. "Gary," Kirk continued, "this is Mr. Spock, the ship's Science Officer and ...". He trailed off. Better to tell him later, in private.

Mitchell held out his hand. Kirk winced. Surely Gary knew that Vulcans did not like to be touched. Mitchell glanced at him for a moment, then returned his attention to Spock.

"Do Vulcans scorn friendly greetings, Mr. Spock?" he asked.

Kirk was shocked. Gary knew about Vulcans - he had learned, as Kirk had learned, of their reserve. The customs of all peoples had to be respected.

Spock raised an eyebrow. "I do greet you, Mr. Mitchell, but it is not my custom to shake hands."

Mitchell lowered his hand. "Why?" he asked stubbornly.

Kirk was about to interrupt. He could not understand why Gary was behaving so boorishly, but Spock's reply stopped him.

"We are touch telepaths," Spock said icily. "The unrestrained thoughts of Humans broadcast continually. If I were to shake hands with you, it would be difficult for me to shut out such thoughts."

The two men stared at one another in dismay. They had both known that Vulcans were telepathic, but had not realised the extent of it. A wave of sympathy for the Vulcan passed through Kirk. How could such a being work in close proximity to Humans when he had such an ability?

"Mr. Spock," he said. "Please attend to the finalisation of the crystals transfer, then take us out of here at maximum warp."

"Yes, Captain," the tall Vulcan said, and immediately moved towards the door.

The Captain's voice stopped him. "We will continue our discussion later."

"Yes, sir," Spock replied. He strode out of the Captain's cabin.

Mitchell pulled a face. "Did I offend him?"

Kirk shrugged. "I don't know, Gary, but..." He trailed off as Mitchell wandered around the room examining everything.

"Very nice, Jim, very nice indeed," Mitchell said as he settled himself into a chair and stretched his legs out. "A distinct improvement from your previous quarters."

Kirk beat down the wave of irritation he was beginning to feel. He had nearly forgotten the familiar way that Gary always treated him. Everyone on board the Enterprise showed him a great deal of

respect. He did not fool himself that it was due to any of his own actions, but they did respect his rank of Captain. The Vulcan, Mr. Spock, was the most courteous person he had ever met, always polite, always formal, enigmatic in his cold, unemotional alienness.

He sighed and sat down in his chair. "Gary, we must talk."

"Fire away, kid. When does your First Officer go on duty?"

"There is a problem."

"A problem?" Mitchell sat up. "What kind of problem?"

There was no easy way to tell him, so Kirk went straight to the point. "I requested you as my First Officer, but Pike sponsored someone else."

Mitchell was horrified. "What!" He could not believe it. "No-one told me. Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were too ill, there was no time," Kirk said. "I had no choice; they accepted Pike's recommendation. Mr. Spock is my First Officer."

Mitchell shook his head in disbelief. "They chose a *Vulcan* to be First Officer on a mainly Human ship?"

"Yes," Kirk said. "They wanted a balance for me. They felt that you and I are too alike." He leaned forward, speaking urgently. "Gary, it is no reflection on you, you must believe me. I'm sorry, but there was nothing I could do."

Mitchell stared at Kirk in anger. "Are you sure there was nothing you could do?"

Jim Kirk also had a quick temper. "Do you think I didn't try my best for you? What kind of friend do you think I am? But I cannot take on the Admiralty. If they want Mr. Spock then my hands are tied."

"Do you want him?"

It was something Kirk had pondered over at some length. He had checked Spock's Starfleet record very carefully, and he had to admit that it was impressive.

"He is reputed to be the finest Science Officer in the Fleet.. A computer expert at the highest level, a mathematical genius, a brilliant officer. He is now the only Vulcan in line duty on an all-worlds ship. The others now prefer to serve on all-Vulcan ships. It is well known that a Vulcan Science Officer is an enormous asset to any ship."

"A Science Officer, yes, but a Vulcan commanding Humans?" Mitchell argued.

"I don't know him, Gary. I only know of his reputation. I must give him a fair trial."

Mitchell found it difficult to control his fury. "This is just what I needed, to come all the way to Starbase One to join you and find out that I needn't have bothered."

"Gary... please... "

"It is quite a shock, Captain, sir," he said stonily. "So where do I stand?"

"You are the ship's chief navigator. As such, you will be part of my regular bridge crew."

"And where am I in the chain of command?"

Kirk took a deep breath. "Fourth."

"Fourth!" Mitchell exclaimed. He got to his feet, almost knocking his chair over. "Fourth!" he repeated.

"I'm sorry," Kirk said. "But my Chief Engineer, Mr. Scott, outranks you." He stood up, went around his desk and faced his friend.

"Gary, I need your help in my new command. Don't make it any harder for me. I need your support more than ever. Don't blame me for something I was powerless to prevent."

Mitchell stared into the worried eyes of his friend, and he relented.

"Okay, Jim, I guess I was startled. It was quite a shock." He smiled a little. "When do I start?"

He saw relief on Kirk's face and tried to rid himself of his anger.

"Next shift, Gary," Kirk said. "Settle in first."

He looked at Mitchell for a long moment, as if to reassure himself that his old friend had really accepted it. "I'm so glad to see you standing there so fit and well again. I was worried sick about you."

He pulled Gary against him and held him tightly. Mitchell sighed and returned the hug. He, more than anyone else, knew that Kirk, under his air of confidence, was often insecure and vulnerable, and he regretted giving him a hard time... But deep down the seeds of resentment had been sown.

CHAPTER TWO

The new navigator quickly became popular with many of his crewmates. Gary Mitchell knew how to tell a good story. He made people laugh, his wit and charm were particularly appealing to women, and his love life soon became one of the main topics of gossip aboard the ship.

The Captain, caught up with the pressure of his new job, had no time nor inclination for the escapades he might have joined in once. He was very aware of his responsibilities as Captain and the need to retain the respect of his crew. He had put any irresponsibility behind him when he had donned the stripes of a Starship Captain. Mitchell, however, still acted much like a junior lieutenant, and after an incident with one of the young medics, which had left the young woman in a distressed state, Kirk decided that he would have

to watch Gary more closely. Old friend or not, no-one was going to affect the morale of the crew. Gary would have to learn that.

Yeoman Rand was one of the younger women who did not find Mitchell attractive. Her eyes were for her Captain only. She waited by his chair for him to sign a report, but he was involved in a discussion with the Engineer. She sighed and faced the viewer, and her eyes caught Mitchell staring at her. She flushed, shuffled and glanced at Kirk. The report lay unsigned in his hands. She did not know what to do. She could not interrupt the Captain or the Engineer in their conversation and as a yeoman she had not the authority to tell a Lieutenant-Commander to mind his station. Mitchell's eyes seemed to undress her, and she felt the sweat on her forehead. She hated men like him. Superior, aggressive, uncaring... She knew how he had hurt Lenora, the young medical technician.

A tall form stepped in front of her.

"Mr. Mitchell," said the Vulcan.

Rand stared at the bony, blue-clad back of the First Officer and sighed with relief. Like all the women on board, she was fascinated and strongly attracted to the strange but gentle Vulcan. They all spoke of him with such respect, but beneath it was a powerful sexual attraction. Uhura, who had served with him during Pike's Captaincy, had soon disillusioned the new crewmembers when she told of his strict privacy and his total lack of social graces. But still, many of them lived in hope.

"Attend your duties, Mr. Mitchell," Spock said sharply.

Mitchell gave a start at his tone. "Yes, sir," he said.

He swivelled round and immediately busied himself at his console. Lt. Sulu, at the helm, glanced over with a slight grin. He was one of the men not keen on Mitchell, who had denigrated his love of botany.

Kirk's attention was caught. He looked at his First Officer in puzzlement. "Is something wrong, Mr. Spock?" he asked.

Spock turned to face him. "I was merely reminding an officer of his duty, sir."

"I see," said Kirk, with a glance to the still flushed Rand. He signed the report, then dismissed her.

He could guess what had happened, and he knew that he should have been the one to notice it and reprimand Mitchell. He stared at the Vulcan, trying to read his expression. Had Mr. Spock noticed the harassment Rand had suffered and gone to her rescue out of duty? Perhaps pity? He could not tell.

"Take the con, Mr. Spock. I'll be in my quarters."

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Mitchell, come with me please," he said mildly.

Once in his quarters, Kirk turned on Mitchell.

"What the hell were you doing, Gary?" he asked.

Mitchell grinned and slumped down into a chair. "Aw, Jim," he began.

"I did not give you permission to sit down," Kirk snapped.

A puzzled expression crossed Mitchell's face.

"On your feet, Mr. Mitchell," Kirk ordered.

He had to exert his authority now, before it was too late. Mitchell had to learn who was in command. He stared at Mitchell until the navigator lowered his gaze and slowly rose to his feet.

"There must be discipline on this ship," he continued, "or we will not function as a team. You ought to know that."

Mitchell began to speak, but Kirk disregarded him. "I will not have you harassing the young crewwomen. I heard about the technician and I am very displeased with you. Yeoman Rand is my personal yeoman and I will not have her upset. She is very young and she is not in your league. We are meant to be civilised men. Sexual harassment is supposed to be a thing of the past. I will not allow it on my ship. You will not annoy the women on this ship again. You will keep your attention on your work while on duty. Whilst off duty, you will remember that you are now a senior officer. Do not abuse that authority. Do you understand me, Mr. Mitchell?"

The navigator, stung by the harshness of Kirk's tone and words, stood stiffly to attention. "Yes, sir," he said shakily.

"Do not presume on our personal friendship," Kirk continued. "No-one, not even you, will disturb the harmony on my ship. I'm disappointed in you, I thought you were on my side." He paused, amazed at his anger at Mitchell, at his sense of betrayal. "I thought I had your support - instead, you are acting like an irresponsible cadet."

He paced up and down while Mitchell watched him, recognising that well-known temper which had never been fully directed at him before. He quailed before it, remembering the unfortunates who had been the recipients of it before. Finally, Kirk stopped in front of him.

"Grow up, Mr. Mitchell, or else you will be transferred off my ship."

Mitchell stared at him in shock. Where was the Jim Kirk he knew, in this serious minded authoritarian figure? He wondered what to do, what to say to placate him, when a slight smile softened Kirk's sternness.

"Gary," he said softly. "I need your complete support. I need a friend to lean on, someone I can rely on. I have always been able to rely on you before. Please, Gary, don't make my life more difficult." He reached out to clasp Mitchell's arms. "I know you are still annoyed about not being First Officer, but you must accept it. You will be promoted soon enough, probably even get your own command."

Mitchell looked down, unable in his guilt to meet Kirk's

intense gaze. "I'm sorry, Jim," he said contritely. "Sometimes I don't know what comes over me."

Kirk accepted the apology, relieved that Mitchell was seeing sense.

"Okay, Gary, return to duty."

He loosened his hold on Mitchell's arms, but Mitchell caught at his hand.

"Don't be angry with me any more."

Kirk grinned a little, and gripped his hand. "I'm not."

Mitchell let out a deep breath and shook Kirk's hand. The last thing he wanted was to lose Kirk's friendship and trust. Those long minutes of Kirk's anger at him made him realise how he valued them.

Once the chastened Mitchell had left, Kirk sat down and surveyed his orders. He was to proceed to Athene 2 after they had delivered the crystals to Bradley's colony. There, he was to determine what had happened to a Vulcan scientific team which had been out of contact with Starfleet for more than a year.

He called the bridge. "Mr. Spock, at our present speed, how long till we reach Bradley's colony?"

The Vulcan hesitated only for a moment, and Kirk had the distinct impression that he had actually worked it out mentally at that moment.

"We will reach the colony in 1.25 solar days, sir."

Kirk smiled a little. Surely the Vulcan had consulted the computer. Yet he had not had the time, and anyway, he was sitting in the command chair.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," he said bemusedly and turned off the intercom. He leaned back in the chair, feeling the tension in his body. The strains of command were draining him. He would have to find some way of reducing his tension or he would not be able to function properly as Captain. Maybe a session in the gym would be a good idea. He made a note to find some time for that.

CHAPTER THREE

They were within three hours of Bradley's colony when the giant alien spacecraft appeared in front of them. It was enormous, easily twenty times the size of the Enterprise. Alarm spread through the bridge crew.

"Red alert," Kirk ordered.

"Red alert," Sulu confirmed. "Shields up."

"Phaser crew standing by, Captain," Mitchell said. "Ready to fire."

"Hold," Kirk said. "We'll take no aggressive action. Mr. Spock, report."

The Vulcan looked up from his viewer. "Alien ship of a type unknown to us, sir. Metal unknown, power source unknown. Sensors show that there are approximately 2,000 life forms aboard her. The atmosphere in the ship is 87% methane, 13% unknown. The outer hull is pitted and scarred by meteor strikes." He bent over the viewer again. "The data now coming in confirms that the ship is extremely old. They have weapons but sensor readings are inconclusive as to their power source."

Kirk was impressed by the speed in which Spock made his evaluations. He had never seen a Science Officer like him.

"We must take every precaution."

"That is logical, sir."

"Open a channel to that ship, Lt. Uhura," Kirk said.

"Aye, sir," Uhura said. "Hailing frequencies open."

Kirk took a deep breath. "This is Captain James T. Kirk commanding the USS Enterprise. We are on a peaceful mission. Please acknowledge."

There was a silence which stretched for several minutes. It was broken by Spock relaying further facts from his sensors. Kirk listened with interest, fascinated by his First Officer's precision.

"Do they understand us?" he asked.

"The universal translator has never been known to fail, sir."

Kirk nodded. "Let us try again. This is Captain James T. Kirk of the USS Enterprise. Please identify yourself. We are on a peaceful mission, we mean you no harm. Please acknowledge."

They waited for a few moments, then Uhura said, "Captain, message coming through. I have it on visual."

Kirk was pleased. He looked at the viewscreen with anticipation. Here it was. Unknown life forms. What would they be like? He breathed slowly as the images on the screen cleared, and the aliens appeared...

Horror swept the bridge as the sight of the beings registered with the crew. Monstrous pulsating bodies, a sickly colour, with waving appendages, slimy tentacles grasping inconceivable, revolting, sluglike things.

Spock watched unmoved, fascinated by their complete alienness; but he soon became aware of the revulsion of the bridge crew. It hit him like tidal wave. He strove to shut them out. He turned to the Captain, and noticed that he alone showed no signs of horror.

Kirk looked at him. "Life is truly diverse, Mr. Spock."

"Indeed, sir," Spock replied. "But the crew are perturbed."

"I know," Kirk said unhappily. "Uhura, give me shipwide communications."

Uhura composed herself. "Aye, sir."

"Attention," Kirk snapped. "This mission is to seek out new life forms. Here we have a wonderful opportunity to make contact."

"Oh, my god," Mitchell murmured. "They are disgusting."

Kirk threw him an angry look. "Do not let your conception of ugliness cloud your judgement. All creatures have their own type of beauty. Kirk out."

A large orifice opened up in one of the alien beings. Inside were slithering, wormlike strands.

"Jim," Mitchell hissed. "You can't negotiate with these revolting things, they are like something out of a nightmare...."

"Silence," Jim Kirk said softly, dangerously.

Mitchell stared at him for a long moment, then lowered his eyes to his console.

The being spoke. "I am Commander Mdorn."

The voice filled the bridge. It was richly female, low, vibrant, sensual. The men of the crew were fascinated to hear such a voice.

"I greet you, Commander," Kirk said, recovering his composure quickly. "Are you in trouble? Could we be of assistance to you?"

The alien voice was shocked. "You!!! Offer to help us... You... a male!!!!!"

Kirk's eyes widened. He glanced at the Vulcan who, seeing his startlement, came over to the rail. Something in his stance showed tension, and Kirk knew he would have to be very diplomatic here.

"Commander," he said. "In our society, men... male and female are equal." There was silence from the alien commander as she appeared to consult with her crew.

"A matriarchy, Captain. One where it is possible that the males are not intelligent. There are examples in the animal kingdom."

"Yes," Kirk mused. "We must tread carefully here."

"Indeed, sir. One must think of the Black Widow spider, which devours its mate once procreation is over."

Before Kirk was able to answer that, the Commander spoke. "Truly life is diverse, Captain."

Kirk glanced at Spock in amusement. She was of the same opinion as he!

"You who are oxygen breathers are truly different," Mdorn continued. "No matter, I accept that in your society, males are different. I ask for your help."

The women on the bridge exchanged amused glances at the discomfiture of the men. Uhura chuckled. She decided that she

liked the alien.

"In our species the males are not intelligent, they exist only to further the race. It is the females who rule. We are the scientists, the engineers, the artisans. I am both Queen and commander of my people. We have been travelling for many..." The word did not translate. "Countless generations have lived and died aboard our ship, as we seek a home. Our time is running out. The ship is old and its systems are failing. We cannot travel vast distances for much longer. We will die if we do not find a suitable planet to call home."

Kirk stared at the screen, still trying to reconcile the voice and appearance of Mdorn. What was he to do? Could he trust that she told the truth? How could he tell?

"Captain," Spock's voice interrupted. "Further sensor readings have indicated that the atmosphere of their ship is polluted. Many of the life forms aboard are faint and erratic. I believe they are dying."

Kirk made up his mind. "My lady, Commander Mdorn," he said, hoping that the universal translator would not fail him in his attempt to show her respect. "I am truly sympathetic to your plight. Tell me, please, why did you leave your world?"

"A scourge wasted our home. We sought to escape it by travelling in space. We did not know that we would travel for so long without finding a world we could live on."

Kirk leaned forward. "My Lady, I must consult with my command centre. Please relay your problems to my Science Officer. Perhaps we can help you with some of your immediate problems. I will put your case to the Federation. There must be a world which can sustain your life."

"Captain, you give us hope again."

Mitchell could not hold back any longer. "I can't believe this, Jim. You are seriously thinking about allowing them into Federation space. Giving them one of our planets....are you crazy? Disgusting monsters like that... You can't do it."

"Mr. Mitchell," Kirk said sharply. "You are relieved of duty. Once your replacement is on the bridge, confine yourself to quarters till I send for you."

Mitchell stood up, ready to defy him, but he saw the look on Kirk's face and hesitated. He knew that tone, and he knew also that Kirk expected total obedience.

The whole bridge crew watched. All were aware of Gary Mitchell's special relationship with the Captain and they wondered if it would make any difference as to how Kirk dealt with him. Would he be lenient with him because of their friendship? Was he that kind of Captain?

Mitchell threw caution to the wind. "How can you believe the lies those things are giving you? They want to kill us, can't you see that? You can't find common ground with anything as alien as that..."

Kirk got to his feet. He drew himself up and clenched his

fists by his sides in an effort to control his temper.

"Confine yourself to quarters at once, Mr. Mitchell, or else you will be put in the brig."

"Jim," Mitchell persisted, unable to stop himself, "they are revolting alien slugs! You..."

"Enough!" Kirk yelled.

Mitchell put a hand on his console to steady himself. He had never known Kirk to raise his voice in that manner.

"I want useful advice from my crew, not this bigotry. Security, escort Mr. Mitchell to the brig."

Two security men fell in at Mitchell's side.

"You will answer to me, once this is over. I will not have this kind of behaviour from my officers. Leave the bridge."

Mitchell could not believe it as he was led away. He walked as if in a stupor, and once locked in the brig, he slumped down onto the bunk and buried his face in the pillow. What had made him defy Jim in that way? Why was he trying so hard to destroy the friendship which was so important to him? He let out a sob of frustration. Was he trying to get back at Jim for not forcing Starfleet to make him First Officer? Was he jealous that Jim, younger than he, had risen above him in rank? Was he really that petty? He punched at the pillow in a frenzy of anger, disgusted with himself. He would apologise to Jim. He knew that his old friend never held grudges. Jim would not be angry with him for long.

Spock returned his attention to his console and concentrated on the dialogue with the alien ship. He had watched the exchange between the two men, and had wondered at the strange, illogical friendships that Humans made. He was aware of the total silence on the bridge and of the tense atmosphere as Mitchell was led out. He ignored it, but he sensed the Captain's presence beside him a few moments later. He stood up.

"Sir, I am receiving details from the ship's Science Officer. I am passing everything to my section."

Kirk let out a deep breath, and Spock could feel the waves of tension emanating from him. How could Humans live with such stress?

Kirk turned to face his crew. "I welcome all ideas and suggestions from my crew. I do not expect such a fear of the unknown from Starfleet's finest officers. I will not listen to views which stem from racial prejudice. Do you all understand me?"

Spock's respect for his Captain increased as he listened. Kirk was turning out to be an interesting commander. Perhaps he had misjudged him.

"Mr. Spock," Kirk said, turning to him. "Can you handle this?"

"Indeed, Captain."

The Captain surveyed his First Officer, seeing his calm, efficient manner. Some of his tension drained away.

"Then I will contact Starfleet. Perhaps they will be able to find these people a home."

Kirk waited patiently for his Science Officer's evaluation, and it gave him time to reflect on Gary's behaviour. Why had he acted this way? What had happened to his happy-go-lucky friend? Was there still such anger in him because he was not First Officer? Was the responsibility of a senior position too much for him? If that was the case, then Jim was relieved that his request for Gary to fill the post of First Officer had been turned down. The second in command of a Starship had to be a particularly balanced individual, able to support his commanding officer, but willing to suggest his own ideas and correct his Captain if necessary. Kirk wondered how he was going to work with a Vulcan in such a particularly close professional partnership.

The Vulcan came to his side. "Captain, I have determined the cause of the pollution in their ship's atmosphere, and I have found the antidote."

"What!" Kirk exclaimed, sitting up straight.

"It is a simple matter. It...."

"You know how to clear it up, Mr. Spock? But how?"

"Perfectly straightforward, sir. A high intensity bombardment of X-V-X gas, applied through their ventilation system, will not be harmful to their bodies but will neutralise the polluting agent."

Kirk was amazed. "But how did you discover this?"

"I correlated the data they gave me. They were most thorough, sir. The answer was not difficult, once I was able to determine all the facts."

Kirk stared at the Vulcan. What an asset this officer was to his ship. He had given him the means to save a completely unknown species, a species which would be grateful to the Federation and willing to join with them in peace.

"Well done, Mr. Spock."

Spock was surprised at his own reaction to that praise. He quickly and relentlessly pushed it aside. "What are your orders, sir?"

"We will relay your discovery to Starfleet, but on my authority you will inform Mdorn of our willingness to help, if she cannot implement the antidote herself. I believe that in giving her the solution to this problem we will make her a strong ally, and future member of the Federation."

"Very well, sir," Spock said. He hesitated.

"Yes, Mr. Spock?" Kirk asked.

"I believe, sir, you have made a wise decision."

A wide smile covered Kirk's face. "Why, thank you, Mr. Spock."

Spock raised an eyebrow at the pleasure on the Captain's face. He could not understand Humans. Yet he knew that he was the cause of the Captain's improved mood. He nodded and returned to his station.

The alien commander was ecstatic. "You have saved us, Captain. We will be eternally grateful to you and Mr. Spock. We thought that we were doomed to die in space, but you have given us the answer to our problem. We have already begun the procedure."

"I have further news, My Lady Mdorn. If you will proceed to Starbase 5, there will be Federation ambassadors there to meet you. I believe that they may have found a suitable world for you."

"Captain... my deepest thanks. I cannot repay you for what you have done for us. We cannot meet, I cannot thank you personally. Alas, I regret that we are so different."

"It is my regret also."

"I must ask you a further boon, Captain. Allow me to see Mr. Spock. We have been on audio link only."

Kirk motioned the Vulcan over. "The lady shows an interest in you. We must grant her wish." He smiled at his First Officer.

Spock stood at his side. "If you wish, sir."

"Commander," Kirk said. "Allow me to present to you my exceptionally gifted Science Officer, Commander Spock."

Spock raised an eyebrow at that praise, but he controlled any further response. He faced the viewscreen. "Greetings, My Lady Mdorn."

There was a long silence, then the alien's voice, sultrier than ever, filled the bridge. "You are different."

"I am a Vulcan, the others are Human."

"Then truly you are a united Federation of different species?"

"Truly, My Lady."

"Ah, Mr. Spock, your form is as exquisite as your intelligence. If only our species were compatible. What children we would have."

The Humans on the bridge tried to conceal their laughter as Spock shifted uncomfortably. Jim Kirk watched him with amusement.

Spock bowed gracefully. "I am honoured," he said, trying to conceal his embarrassment.

"I regret that knowledge is all we are able to exchange."

"The exchange of knowledge, My Lady, is of deep importance," Spock said. "It shows our trust in one another, surely true communication. The United Federation of Planets is based on trust. The trust of one species to another, always a desirable goal."

"You are wise, Mr. Spock. I salute you."

The Vulcan raised his hand in the paired fingers salute of his

people. "Live long and prosper, My Lady."

"I will now, thanks to you and your Captain."

"We are seekers of peace. We wish only to learn of other races. We wish friendly contact; that is our mission in space."

Kirk decided that he could not have put it better himself. His regard for his First Officer was rapidly growing.

"Lt. Uhura will relay to you the course to Starbase 5," Kirk said. He raised his hand to the image on the screen. "I wish you well."

"Farewell, Captain. In your honour I shall give your name to my daughter, who is to be born. Her name shall be James."

Jim Kirk covered his startlement. "I am deeply honoured, My Lady M'dorn, thank you."

He glanced up at the Vulcan and met his dark, unreadable eyes. He hoped that M'dorn would never find out that his name was purely a male one.

"Well," he said as the alien ship went into warp drive and disappeared from their screens. "I'm glad that all worked out. They were only refugees looking for a home." He stood up and faced the Vulcan. "Mr. Spock, I must congratulate you on the way you handled that. I am pleased to have an officer of your quality with me. Your skill is most impressive."

"Thank you, sir," Spock said, beating down the feeling Kirk's words had caused; the same feeling he had experienced earlier.

"I think you charmed the lady," Kirk teased.

Spock looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"I... uh... mean she liked your body as well as your mind." No, that was not right either, Kirk realised. "She was grateful to you for solving her environmental problems."

"Indeed, sir."

Kirk scratched his forehead. He would have to try to keep his often perverse sense of humour under control, especially around the Vulcan.

"Well, Mr. Spock," he said in an attempt to change the topic of conversation. "What is your opinion of the matriarchal system our new friends live under?"

"Many races in the galaxy are matriarchal, sir. The only known races to have mistreated their females are Humans and Klingons."

Kirk glanced at the interested and lovely face of Uhura. "We have grown out of such behaviour, thankfully."

She smiled at him.

"And what of Vulcans?"

"It is inconceivable to Vulcans to mistreat anyone, sir. All

are equal."

"Then there have been female rulers on your planet?"

"Indeed, sir. There have been many throughout our history. To my people, all that matters is the person's abilities, regardless of race or sex. The repression of anyone is anathema to us."

"That is very commendable, Mr. Spock. I wish our history could say the same."

Uhura glanced over at Janice Rand, who had recently entered the bridge and now stood behind the Captain's chair. They smiled at one another, somehow not surprised that the very masculine Vulcan should believe in the equality of all. Officially the advancement of women in Starfleet was meant to be equal to the men, but there was yet to be a female Starship Captain. It was one area of command where men dominated, even though women commanded smaller ships.

Kirk chewed at his lip. The time had come for him to deal with Gary. He sighed. What was he to do? He looked up at the Vulcan, and suddenly realised that with this unique being at his side he felt confident, and he thanked whoever it was at the Admiralty who had decided to refuse his application for Mitchell.

"Mr. Spock, take over please. I will be in my quarters."

"Yes, sir," Spock replied, and watched the Captain leave the bridge. *Mitchell again*, he surmised. He could not understand the obvious feeling between the Captain and Mitchell, but he knew that Kirk was rapidly seeing aspects of his friend that he did not like.

Shyly, Janice Rand handed Spock a report to sign. He took it from her.

"Mr. S-Spock," she stammered.

"Yes, Yeoman."

"I want to thank you for assisting me when Mr. Mitchell..."

He looked at her and she flushed and lowered her eyes.

"Carry on, Yeoman," he said, handing her the report.

She beat a hasty retreat from the bridge.

Spock sat in the command chair. Why had Kirk asked him so many questions about Vulcan? Why had he praised him so highly? He was aware that everyone on the bridge had heard, and to one who preferred to keep himself quiet, it was most disquieting. He wondered at this young Captain, so different from his predecessor.

CHAPTER FOUR

This time Gary did not flop into a seat. He stood to attention in front of his Captain, the two security men flanking him. Kirk did not look up from his report for several minutes. The words blurred before his eyes, but he stared down, silently counting the seconds.

"Mr. Kelowitz," he said eventually. "Wait outside with Mr. Singh."

He waited until he was alone with Gary, then stared at him. Mitchell dropped his gaze, unable to take the accusation and disappointment in Kirk's eyes.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Mr. Mitchell?"

"I'm sorry," Mitchell said, staring at the floor.

"You are sorry," Kirk said. "Is that all?"

Mitchell did not answer.

"What kind of officer is it who would jeopardise an important new contact because the form of the contact repulses him? What kind of Starfleet officer are you? You have worked with non-Humans before. You have taken all the courses in xenobiology. What is wrong with you?"

Mitchell glanced up, then lowered his eyes again. "I don't know, sir." He was ashamed, deeply ashamed.

"You don't know," Kirk repeated, his voice full of contempt. "What kind of answer is that?"

Gary swallowed. It was all turning out wrong. What was he to say? "Jim," he murmured.

"I do not understand. I've known you for years, and I cannot work out why you should be so shocked and prejudiced. I thought I had your support. You told me once that I had your unswerving loyalty."

"You have that, Captain. I swear it."

Mitchell's voice was hoarse. Kirk heard the raw emotion in it.

"Look at me," he demanded.

Reluctantly, and afraid to, Mitchell looked at his Captain.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm such a fool. You are the best friend anyone could have and I've let you down. I've given you nothing but trouble. Please give me a chance to make it up to you. Set me any punishment you want." He swallowed convulsively. "I'm sorry."

Kirk knew he should have relented, but something in him refused. His trust in Gary had been badly shaken. He compared him to the Vulcan, and he realised just how extraordinary his First Officer was, so cool and efficient in a difficult situation. He hardened his heart to Gary's contrite expression. The navigator would have to learn the hard way. A Starship could not run on favourites.

Mitchell saw that Kirk's attitude towards him had not softened, and he took fright. There had never been a time when he had not been able to get around Jim Kirk. He had always been able to manipulate him around eventually. He had never known him to be this angry. He had to do something.

"Please, Captain," he pleaded. "Forgive me. I won't let you

down again. Please."

He listened to himself, amazed that he was pleading. It was not in his nature, it was not normal to him. Usually he brazened his way out of any predicament. He closed his eyes tightly for a moment in an effort to stop the sudden tears which threatened to humiliate him.

Kirk did not answer. He seemed unaware of Mitchell's uncharacteristic behaviour. He sat down at his desk and drummed his fingers against it.

"Captain, what do you want me to do?" Mitchell asked.

Kirk glared at him. He did not speak.

A sudden anger flared in Mitchell. "Do you want me to kneel and beg your forgiveness? I've done everything else."

Furious at the defiance still in Mitchell's attitude, Kirk stood up. "Return to the brig. Reflect on your behaviour and rectify it. I will not allow bigotry or insubordination on my ship."

Mitchell had to blink back another rush of tears. It suddenly came to him that on the Enterprise Kirk's word was law, and even old, close friends could not antagonise him. He realised the power Jim Kirk now wielded, power backed up by the Security Section, and the Vulcan First Officer. He could no longer treat him in the jokey, familiar way he had always used to, unless Kirk allowed it. He doubted if he would be given that right for a long time.

"Y-yes, sir," he murmured and turned to go.

"Mitchell." Kirk's voice stopped him. Hopefully, he turned around. "If this behaviour continues, you will be demoted."

Gary swallowed. "It won't, sir, I promise you."

He took a step forward, his hand outstretched. "Please, will you accept my apology?"

Kirk's look was icy. "I will consider it."

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir."

"Security," Kirk called.

The two men returned.

"Return Mr. Mitchell to the brig."

Kirk waited until Gary had left, then sunk his head onto his hands. It had been very difficult for him to ignore Gary's pleas, but he knew he had to teach his friend a lesson. He was genuinely fond of Gary, who in the past had been a good and loyal friend, but he knew his faults only too well. Now he was finding more serious flaws in Gary's character, and if he allowed Gary to continue unchecked, his own authority on the Enterprise would be seriously undermined. For Gary to plead was something highly unusual, and Kirk hoped that he was understanding his own foolishness. He was touched though; it showed him how much their friendship meant to

Gary.

Kirk sat back, feeling the tension in his body. He was tightly wound up, and knew that he would have to relax somehow. He remembered his idea of the other day, to go to the gym, work out the strain - he needed the exercise anyway. He grinned. McCoy would approve. Sighing, he called the bridge.

"Mr. Spock, please call me when we reach the colony."

"Yes, sir," the Vulcan said.

"I have confined Mitchell to the brig for the present. Assign the navigation staff to cover his duty time for the next two days."

Spock raised an eyebrow, but did not comment.

"Do you think I am being too harsh on him?" Kirk asked. "What is your opinion?"

"Discipline must be maintained, sir."

"Yes, discipline. Mr. Spock, I want you to set up a course in xenobiology. The crew were too shocked by the recent encounter. I want them reminded that life in the galaxy is richly diverse. I want them aware of the different cultures and customs, and the varied forms of all non-Human life. This course will be mandatory."

Spock kept his surprise to himself. This new Captain had hidden depths. "Yes, sir," he replied tonelessly.

"Kirk out."

CHAPTER FIVE

To Kirk's surprise, Spock was in the gymnasium. He was working the machine nicknamed 'The Excruciator' for the way it worked the upper body muscles and the often painful after-effects from its use. Kirk found it a challenge, and over the years, had often tested himself against it. One day he would beat the record and score over 200 on it. He glanced at the indicator, and his eyes widened when he saw the number that Mr. Spock had reached - 266, and it was still rising. He let out a low whistle of admiration. He had never seen such a score, nor had he seen anyone work the machine with such intense concentration.

"Amazing, isn't it?" said a voice beside him.

He turned to see McCoy there.

"We know so little about Vulcans."

Kirk returned his attention to the still rising indicator. "We must respect their privacy, Bones." He watched the First Officer closely, seeing his almost trancelike state. "They have given we Humans so much. We have needed their help and guidance since first contact. Sometimes I wonder if we could have survived in space without them."

McCoy shook his head. "Who knows, Jim. But I need to know more about this particular Vulcan. I'm the one who has to treat him

if he is ill or injured."

"Surely the medical records...."

"There is very little. He has been disgustingly healthy."

As if suddenly aware of their scrutiny, Spock released his grip on the machine.

"Captain," he said respectfully. He clasped his hands behind his back.

"Mr. Spock, that is quite a reading. My record is 198, and that is considered excellent."

"It is, sir, for a Human."

"I... uh... see," Kirk murmured, a little amused. He noted that Spock was not even sweating. He knew that Vulcans were stronger than Humans, but...

McCoy's comment interrupted his thoughts. "I wouldn't like to meet you in a dark alleyway. No Human would be able to stand up to you."

"I can assure you, Doctor, I am bred to peace. I do not practice violence, and would never take advantage of a physically weaker species."

"Hallelujah for that!" McCoy said with a touch of sarcasm. He turned to Kirk. "You wouldn't believe where his heart is, Jim."

"Doctor," Spock said coldly, "Vulcans are physiologically different from Humans, as are many races in the galaxy."

Kirk was intrigued. "But Mr. Spock, as a Starfleet officer, you must have been in combat."

"Indeed, sir, I have. However I will fight only if there is no alternative."

Jim had read of the reluctance of Vulcans to use physical violence. It had been one of the problems when Starfleet had been founded - Humans only too willing to get into a fight; Vulcans trying to avoid them. Eventually Vulcan ideals had won out, with the rule of the Prime Directive and the training of diplomacy given priority. Humans endeavoured to accept the philosophy of non-violence as much as possible, but Starfleet still had its weapons for defence purposes, and required all its personnel to be able to defend themselves.

McCoy was not convinced. "Many races are different from Humans, that is true, but none are to my knowledge as strong as you are."

"You need not fear, Doctor. Vulcan has had peace for thousands of years. There is no crime on our planet. We do not kill or injure for pleasure. We do not kill for food. We are vegetarians."

"Even so, I'd hate to be your opponent."

He eyed the thin, black-clad figure of the First Officer, and saw the power in that lean frame. He shook his head.

The crowded gym was silent as the crew listened to their senior officers.

"Do you test your strength only against the machines?" Kirk asked.

"Indeed, sir. I would not care to injure a Human."

A voice interrupted. "Begging your pardon, sir, but I believe that a man is not so... fragile. I think I could give you a good round."

They turned and Kirk recognised Lt. Stiles, a belligerent young man from the phaser crew who was reputed to be the ship's champion at unarmed combat.

"I think, sir," Stiles continued, "all this talk about Vulcan strength is misleading. A machine cannot have the responses of a man. A man is superior in all ways to a..." He broke off and flushed under Spock's scrutiny.

The Vulcan stood impassive, but he wondered if the others had heard Stiles' unspoken word as he had done, or if they thought he had been about to say 'machine'.

"Mr. Stiles," he said, "I assure you that you would not last very long against me."

"Maybe you're afraid, Mr. Science Officer. If I win, I will have burst that bubble of Vulcan mystique," Stiles mocked. "What would that do to your image?"

Kirk did not like the tone of the man, it was close to insolence. "I suggest, Stiles, that you heed Mr. Spock's warning," he said.

"Captain," Stiles urged, "I am only challenging him. We have combat bouts here often. Why does he not join in?"

The Captain looked closely at Stiles, taking in his muscular aggressiveness, then he glanced at Spock, seeing the restrained but noticeable aura of power which surrounded him. He would like to see it, he admitted to himself.

"It's up to you, Mr. Spock," he said. "You have given fair warning. If you go ahead and he is injured, it is his responsibility, not yours. Do you understand that, Mr. Stiles?"

Impatiently, Stiles nodded. "Well, Mr. Spock," he asked eagerly, "do you accept?"

Spock studied the Captain for a moment, wondering why he had specifically placed the responsibility on Stiles; then it came to him that Kirk was trying to protect him from any repercussions from his winning. Why would he do such a thing? He dismissed the question for the moment and returned his attention to Stiles. He assessed the situation. If he refused to fight, he would be mocked, if he accepted he would be feared. He was a senior officer; better to be feared.

"Very well, Mr. Stiles," he said. "Prepare yourself."

Stiles grinned. He would show his friends that he could take

on a Vulcan. Better still, he would show the Vulcan. He crouched, legs astride, preparing for his favourite throw.

The others fanned out in a circle around them. Kirk watched carefully. All he saw was a blur of motion, as Spock caught Stiles around the wrist and effortlessly threw him onto the mat. Stiles landed awkwardly, let out a yell of pain and cradled his wrist against him. Spock stood back as McCoy knelt beside Stiles to examine him.

"His wrist is broken!" McCoy exclaimed. "We'd better get you to sickbay, Stiles."

Everyone stared at the Vulcan in awe. They had never seen anything like it. Kirk let out a breath.

"I regret that Mr. Stiles is injured, Captain," Spock said coolly. "I assumed he had been trained to fall correctly."

Kirk looked from the stunned Stiles to the enigmatic Vulcan. "Of course, Mr. Spock. You did warn him; he did not heed that warning."

"Captain," Stiles complained, "I wasn't ready. He tricked me. He used all his strength on me."

"Indeed I did not," Spock said harshly. "If I had used Vulcan strength, you would have had a broken back."

"Mr. Stiles," Kirk said firmly. "The responsibility for your injury lies with you. Go to sickbay with the doctor, and make no further complaint."

"Aye, sir," Stiles said resignedly, and allowed McCoy to help him to his feet. Chastened, he left without a backward glance.

Kirk glanced around the room, seeing how the others had gone as far from Spock as possible. He sighed, knowing why, but he also knew the reason the Vulcan had accepted the challenge. He would have done the same. He faced the First Officer. The throw had intrigued him.

"What kind of throw was that? I've never seen anything like it, and unarmed combat is an interest of mine."

Spock clasped his hands behind his back and stared at some point over the Captain's head. "It is a Vulcan technique used primarily to train children. That is why I used it against Stiles. I did not think it would cause him injury."

"Children learn this!" Kirk exclaimed in amazement.

"Indeed. It is used to improve their balance and their muscle power."

Highly interested now, Kirk asked, "Would you teach me that throw?"

Spock looked at him, startled, and Kirk saw the slight expression in his eyes. He forced himself not to look away from that dark, penetrating gaze. It was not easy. It was difficult for any Human to look Spock in the eye, it made them decidedly uncomfortable; but Kirk held his ground.

Finally Spock broke the silence. "I would not wish to cause the Captain any injury."

Kirk frowned as a thought came to him. "Oh, forgive me, Mr. Spock, perhaps it is against your traditions to teach it to an outsider."

Spock blinked, but Kirk was still gazing intently at him. "There is no restriction on it being taught to a non-Vulcan, sir."

"Then a Human could learn it?"

"It does not take strength, sir."

"I see," Kirk said, trying not to take offence, knowing that no insult was intended. "Then will you teach me?" He saw the hesitation on the Vulcan's part and added, "I assure you that I know how to fall, and I have confidence that you will not injure me."

"Very well, sir," Spock said after a long moment of unsureness. He lowered his gaze, acknowledging the Captain's words.

As Kirk threw off his shirt and boots, Spock felt the strange emanations from the watching crewmembers. He glanced across at them, and noted the rapt attention of the women. He raised an eyebrow and looked at Kirk, who now faced him. Human sexual attraction was a mystery to him, but he assumed that Kirk's muscular frame must have caused some kind of response from the crewwomen. Physical attraction was most illogical. He was unaware that he and Kirk, so different from one another, looked particularly effective together, complemented each other. He, so dark, lean and mysteriously alien. Kirk, fair haired, muscled, handsomely Human.

"I'm ready," Kirk said.

He listened carefully as Spock explained the throw. It did not seem too difficult. He soon found out that up against a Vulcan, it was. He put all his strength into blocking the throw, but try as he might, he could not, and spent the next ten minutes landing on the mat. He stood up once more, and wiped the sweat out of his eyes. Spock's grip was like a vice. He could not break it.

"Let's try again," Kirk said determinedly.

Spock threw him again. He used less strength, but once more the Captain could not keep his feet. Aware by the contact of the Human's frustration, he was unsure of how to proceed. He glanced over at the restless Humans who watched them, and made a decision.

"Captain," he said, "now you are familiar with the method, perhaps you would wish to throw me."

Kirk pulled a face. "I could try," he said with grim amusement. He had never been up against anyone as strong as the Vulcan, and he was unsure as to how that made him feel. He had not lost in unarmed combat for years.

"Very well, sir," Spock said, holding out his arm.

Kirk took a deep breath. He grabbed the bony wrists of his First Officer, feeling their strength. Sweat poured from him as he tried repeatedly to throw him, refusing to give in.

Spock glanced over his head to the others, his acute hearing taking in their whispered comments, their discomfiture at their Captain's failures. More so, Kirk's chagrin was painfully forcing itself upon him through the contact. He made a further decision.

"Captain, you must apply more pressure here," he said, adjusting Kirk's grip on him.

Kirk looked up at him. "What am I doing wrong?" he asked. His hair was plastered down on his forehead with sweat, his face flushed.

"Keep an even balance, then shift your weight to your right foot, then try. That should upset your opponent's equilibrium."

"Right," Kirk said firmly. He followed the instructions carefully and a moment later, to his amazement, Spock was on the mat.

Loud applause greeted that, and totally startled, Kirk turned around. He had completely forgotten about the spectators. He grinned tiredly, waved down their noisy response and turned back to the Vulcan who was already on his feet and in his usual stance. He stared at Spock, but that alien face was unreadable. He remembered that immovable strength. He went over everything he had done and he knew for sure that he could not have thrown Spock by his own power. The Vulcan had allowed him the throw, and he realised why. It had been done for him, so he would not appear weak in the eyes of the crew, and he, a new Captain trying to win respect and loyalty of that crew, appreciated the gesture enormously. Why had Spock done it though? Was it through a sense of duty or was it something else entirely? He did not know. He only knew that the Vulcan, this day, had given him a gift.

"Do you wish to stop now, sir?" asked the First Officer.

Kirk smiled, realising he had been given a further gift. He had been left with a victory, not overshadowed by defeat. He wished he understood the Vulcan and decided that he was damn well going to try. Somehow, he knew that it was very important to him.

"Mr. Spock," he said.

"Sir," Spock replied, his eyes once again staring into the distance.

"Mr. Spock," Kirk persisted. "Mr. Spock," until he had the Vulcan's gaze on him. "Thank you."

"Sir?"

"I know you understand. I know it," Kirk said intently.

Something in the alien eyes changed, Kirk noticed, but then Spock bowed his head, and when his eyes met Kirk's again, they were as expressionless as usual.

"I am honoured, sir," Spock said.

Kirk smiled at him warmly. "I think I am the one honoured."

Spock raised an eyebrow but did not reply.

Kirk wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "Let's shower. I'm wringing with sweat."

"Very well, Captain."

As they walked to the shower room, Kirk noted that Spock was not showing any signs of exertion. "Aren't you tired?" he asked.

"No, sir. I have not yet reached that level."

"You're not even breaking sweat!"

"Vulcan metabolism is different from Human, sir. The temperature on the ship is cold by my standards."

"I see," Kirk said. "I had not realised."

They entered the shower room, and as he stripped, Kirk said, "So little is known about your people."

Spock looked away. "We are a private people, sir."

"Yes, I understand that, but I think it must be difficult for you to live and work amongst Humans."

Surprised, Spock turned to look at him, seeing how unselfconscious he was, standing there in his nakedness.

"One becomes accustomed to it, sir."

Kirk glanced at him with a certain scepticism, but said no more. He went into the shower and let the hot water ease out the aches and pains all those falls had caused. He stepped out, refreshed, and suddenly realised that all his tension and strain had disappeared. He stretched contentedly. The hard exercise the First Officer had put him through had been the best therapy of all. He dressed and came over to where the Vulcan waited.

"Mr. Spock, it is a curious but interesting fact that whenever I am involved with you, whether over chess or now over exercise, I feel so relaxed. You are good for me."

Spock stood perfectly still, willing himself not to show the surprise he felt.

"Will you show me some more of these exercises?" Kirk asked, "As you must know, I spent months in a regen bed after injury. My fitness is still below par. Would it help me?"

Seeing Spock's hesitation, Kirk wondered if he had offended him. "It's not a command, only a request. You may refuse, if you wish."

Kirk's open gaze made Spock uncomfortable. How was he to deal with this Captain who had been able to understand his gesture, who had backed him over the situation with Stiles, who did not flinch from eye contact as other Humans did, and who had asked him for instruction in a Vulcan discipline. He had to speak, but he was at a loss for words.

"Mr. Spock?" Kirk inquired, his tone worried. He *had* offended him. Why did he not know more about Vulcans?

"If you wish it," Spock finally replied, "I will instruct you. It will improve your fitness and stamina, if you work at it diligently."

"Thank you," Kirk said with relief. "We'll fit it in with our schedule, every day."

The Vulcan nodded. "Then it is settled," Kirk said happily. "Will you join me for a meal?"

Once more he saw the touch of startlement in the alien eyes. So he had not imagined it after all. This was no cold, unemotional being. He could be reached. Kirk knew that for certain now.

"If you wish it, sir," Spock said, after a moment.

"I certainly do wish it, Mr. Spock."

CHAPTER SIX

The main rec room was crowded. Conversation stopped as the people there saw their two commanding officers. Word had spread quickly about the interesting session in the gym. It was unknown for Mr. Spock to work out with fellow officers, let alone teach anyone a Vulcan throw.

Kirk greeted his crew, punched up his choice of meal and made his way to an empty table. Spock followed and sat down opposite him as the hum of conversation started up again. Once it had reached a normal level, Kirk decided to ask the question that had slightly worried him earlier.

"You have said you are a touch telepath. How did you avoid my thoughts?"

"I have mental shields, sir, which I maintain always. I could not possibly read your thoughts. I would not. It would be an invasion of your privacy."

"I see. Then an accidental touch could cause you to read them?"

"No, sir, I could only do so if you allowed it and I willed it. However, I can pick up stray thoughts and emotions through physical contact, which is why I do not touch others."

"I see," Kirk mused. What a burden his First Officer had to bear on this ship full of Humans.

Spock, who had found himself too receptive to his Captain's emotions, noted that the worry cleared from his face. He had not read any thoughts during the training, but he had received strong impressions from him, which he had been unable to shut out. Captain Kirk had powerful emotions, and Vulcan control was, in Spock's case, less than perfect. He would have to work harder at maintaining his shields; they were not protecting him enough.

"I regret you have been bruised," he said, changing the subject.

"Oh, I'll survive... I expect you were not using your full

strength on me, either," Kirk said with a grin.

"Indeed not, sir!"

Kirk laughed. "Mr. Spock, I can tell you will be a most capable ally in a fight. I'll let you know the next time I'm in a fight."

"Sir?" Spock said confusedly.

"A joke, Mr. Spock," Kirk said patiently.

"I do not understand jokes, sir."

Kirk studied him carefully, fascinated by him, wanting to know more about him, but afraid to ask too much in case the very private First Officer thought that he was prying.

"Mr. Spock," he said finally, "I know that when I first came on board, I foolishly resented you for being First Officer instead of Gary, and I know that we did not get off to a good start. I'm sorry about that, and I want us to work well together. I want this ship to be the finest in Starfleet - we must be able to meld as a team. Our five year mission is fraught with so much danger, so many unknowns."

Spock listened keenly. No-one had ever spoken to him like this before.

"There is so much to do. So many colonies and stations to protect, so much responsibility - who knows what other life we will meet, what battles we will have to fight, what decisions I will have to make." He held the Vulcan's attention with his force of will. "I need your total support. I need all the advice and help you can give me. I need and want your loyalty, your friendship."

He saw the shift in the dark Vulcan eyes, but he was unaware that he had given Spock one of the severest shocks of his life.

Spock had never met anyone like Kirk before. He was being barraged by the Captain's enthusiasm, his emotions, his demands. He tried to withdraw, not knowing how to deal with someone who was reaching to him on such a personal level. He was unused to anyone demanding personal commitment from him, for the occasional one who had tried had soon been discouraged. Kirk was different. Spock sensed that he would never give up, once he had made up his mind on something, and that alarmed him. How was he to answer? He had to remember that this man was his commanding officer, and he did have certain rights.

He sat stiffly. "I have taken the Starfleet oath."

Kirk shook his head. "I know that. I'm talking about personal loyalty and friendship, Mr. Spock." He paused. "That sounds so formal. Do you have another name? What do your friends call you?"

"I have no friends," Spock said tonelessly.

Kirk was horrified. He did not know what to say. He had really put his foot in it this time. He had known that the Vulcan was a loner, a recluse, but he had not realised the extent of his isolation.

"I...." he began, deeply embarrassed.

"My family call me Spock. That will suffice."

A sigh of relief escaped Jim's lips. "Thank you, Spock. Please feel free to call me Jim."

"Yes, sir."

Jim stared at him for several seconds, then chuckled inwardly. Spock intrigued him more and more. He became serious. How to continue? The Vulcan had not seemed concerned when he said he had no friends, yet it seemed so unbelievable. He knew the admiration in which Spock was held, surely he had only to reach out. Then perhaps he could not do so. A life without friends. He shuddered.

"Do Vulcans have no friends?" he asked.

"Indeed they do, sir. Vulcans value friendship highly, but it is not entered into lightly, as Human friendships are."

"Then you cannot be the friend of a Human?" Kirk asked, hoping he was wrong.

Spock tried to control his edginess. "I did not say that, Captain."

"Then?" Kirk asked.

"Humans," Spock answered, "have not yet fully outgrown the fear of anyone who is different. They find it difficult to accept the wants and needs of another species. Everything has to be on their terms. They do not realise that their customs are not the only ones, and although they do try, it is often unsatisfactory."

Kirk did not know how to answer that. He knew there was truth in it, but surely Human beings were improving.

"Human friendships," Spock continued, "I have observed are transitory, unlike the Vulcan bond, which is for life."

Jim shook his head. He had had no idea. "There are Human friendships which are lifelong, but they are rare. In the service, it is difficult due to the life we lead, but surely all types of friendship are possible, even valuable?"

"Perhaps to a Human, sir. I do not know, for I am a Vulcan."

Kirk sat back, his meal totally forgotten. "If Vulcans have no emotion, how can they form a lifetime friendship? Surely friendship means liking, even loving, the other person."

"To a Vulcan, friendship is based on logic, mutual interests, respect and understanding."

"Surely it must go beyond that to feelings," Jim argued.

"There we must differ."

Kirk moved forwards, leaning his elbows on the table. "I have often thought that I would like a deep and abiding friendship. To have one who knows me so completely, with an intimate knowledge of me, and to know another like that." He sighed. "Then you would

never be alone, never afraid, for you would face life together."

He was aware of the intense scrutiny of the Vulcan, but did not flinch from it. The words came from his lips unbidden. "I see that friendship with you will have to be earned, Spock."

Spock blinked; the Captain kept on surprising him.

"I will endeavour to gain your respect and your loyalty. I will try to win from you your friendship, even that which is acceptable to Vulcans. Will you allow me to try, Spock? For I have learned to respect and admire you."

Spock was lost for words. How was he to answer his Captain? Could he dismiss such an offer? Could he refuse it? He lowered his gaze, to hide his confusion. He could not understand this Human, he had never been so uncertain in his life. He called upon Vulcan discipline. Why was it becoming increasingly difficult to maintain?

"I ask your pardon, sir," he said finally. "I have no emotions, I do not know if I am able to give friendship to a Human. I do not wish to give offence. You must understand that I am Vulcan."

"You are half Human," Jim said, immediately regretting it, on seeing the sudden aloofness on Spock's face. "I'm sorry," he added quickly.

"You are stating a fact, Captain, but I am Vulcan in all ways."

Cursing himself for all kinds of a fool, Jim reached out to touch his arm, then he remembered, and placed his hand against the table. How could he get through to this strange, withdrawn being? Yet he was comfortable, relaxed with him. How incongruous that was. He sighed, picked up his coffee and took a sip.

He pulled a face. "It's cold."

Spock, who was becoming more and more uncomfortable with the way the conversation had turned, jumped at the opportunity to move.

"May I bring you another cup, sir?"

"Oh," Kirk murmured. "Thank you."

The Vulcan walked over to the coffee pot and poured out a fresh cup. It gave him the time he needed to gather his jangled thoughts. At first he had believed he would not be able to work with Kirk, but the last weeks, in particular the chess games, the incident with Mdorn, today in the gymnasium, had forced him to change his opinion of the man. Kirk had admirable qualities; he was a born commander, but he was very Human - he made difficult, if not impossible, demands. Spock was disturbed, but he hid it behind Vulcan calm, returned to the table, and handed Kirk the cup.

Kirk smiled up at him. "Thank you, Spock," he said.

Engrossed in his thoughts, Spock had not noticed the quiet which had descended on the room until he sat down. Kirk glanced around curiously, and the hum started up again.

"Did I miss something?" he asked, turning to Spock.

The Vulcan sipped at his fruit drink. "I believe, sir, that they were surprised when I brought your coffee."

The Captain grinned. "Not something you usually do?"

"I have never done it before," Spock replied, his voice revealing some confusion.

"I am honoured then," Kirk said seriously. He leaned forward. "Does it not bother you that the news that the Captain threw his Vulcan First Officer, and now that officer brings his Captain coffee, will be all over the ship?"

"Indeed not, sir. You are my commanding officer. I would not allow another such a privilege."

Jim was unsure if he was being complimented or lectured, but as he drank his hot coffee he decided that he did not care. He liked the Vulcan, he trusted him, and he was going to learn to understand him, no matter what it took.

"I don't expect any further concessions in the gym," he said wryly.

"There will be none, sir. You will have to work to build your strength. Once that is accomplished, perhaps you will be able to throw me."

"I'll work at it," Jim said eagerly. "I'll be a conscientious student, I promise you."

"Excellent."

"I apologise," Jim said after a moment, "if you feel that I have been too personal, too open with you. It is just I feel I can talk to you. Isn't that strange? I hardly know you, we are of different species, and up until recently we have not got on too well." He watched the Vulcan carefully. "I feel more comfortable with you, in a way I do not with any other. I feel I can trust you."

Spock looked down, again unable to take the Captain's open gaze. He swallowed. Why was this Human feeling this way? He was being truthful, Spock knew that, he sensed it. Kirk was so trusting, willing to talk on equal terms with him, willing to risk his body to what he knew was a dangerous martial art, as if he was sure that Spock would allow him to come to no harm. What was happening? How was this possible? Vulcan discipline was wavering, becoming increasingly difficult to maintain, for there was something in him which responded to Kirk. Something that wanted to accept his friendship, wanted to return it. He had been alone for so long...

Jim knew that he had touched the Vulcan in some way. He had seen the mask slip several times, to reveal a being able to feel. He suspected that no-one had ever approached Spock in quite this way before. He would persist, get to the real Spock, even if it took weeks, months, for he knew now that his relationship with the Vulcan was his most important aboard this ship. Why had he not realised it when he had first taken over as Captain? Why had he not taken the time to get to know him then? What a fool he had been.

"Captain." Spock's voice interrupted his musings. "I am honoured by your words. What you say is however difficult for me to

understand. I am not used to such things with Humans."

"Oh, come now. You don't repel Humans. I've seen how the women look at you." Kirk could not help but tease.

"I do not understand, sir."

Kirk grinned. "Spock, I have gone over your file. I have recommendations from your previous Captains. I know the esteem in which you are held. There is nothing but the highest praise for you. Humans like you. I like you, and I must admit I think I would trust you with my life. Crazy, isn't it? You with no emotions, me highly emotional, drawn to one another... or perhaps it's just me drawn to you."

He waited and watched for any reaction to that, and saw once again the slight change in the alien eyes.

"No Human has ever spoken to me as you have, Captain."

"And what do you make of it?"

"I am unable to understand it, sir."

"Spock, I am being unfair to you. I should not question you like this."

"I believe, sir," Spock replied, "that we will have many interesting discussions."

"I sincerely hope so," Kirk replied with a wide grin.

A voice intruded. "Hi, Jim, may I join you?"

Jim looked up to see McCoy there. "Sure, Bones. How is Mr. Stiles?"

"Oh, he'll be fine. It was a clean break, no complications."

Spock seized his chance to escape. "If you will excuse me, sir."

"Oh," Kirk said, annoyed now at the interruption. He had been enjoying his conversation with Spock. "Certainly, Spock."

The Vulcan stood, bowed slightly and left the table.

"Always so damn polite," McCoy muttered under his breath. He waited until Spock had reached the door, where he now stood talking with one of his Science Officers, before he spoke. "That was a damn fool thing you did, Jim. Didn't you see what he did to Stiles? You should not take on someone with that kind of strength."

Kirk grew angry. "I wasn't taking him on; Stiles was doing that. I only asked him to help me build up my fitness, and he agreed. If I get hurt, it will be my fault, not his. One day I might need that little bit extra his training will give me." He grinned, taking the edge off his reprimand. "Bones, he was gentle and patient with me. Strange that one so strong should be so gentle. Anyway, it's a challenge for me to be up against someone who is stronger than me."

"It's your body, Jim. I hope you know what you are doing."

"I have complete trust in him, Bones. I like him."

Vulcan hearing can be a curse, Spock decided, not for the first time, but as he left the room, Kirk's words filtered through to him. 'I have complete trust in him, Bones. I like him.'

It came to him that Kirk could be trusted. He had never had complete trust in a Human before. He had seen how fickle they were but his Captain was different from any Human he had met before.

The door closed behind him and, preoccupied with his thoughts, he bumped into a tall, blonde woman. She grabbed the wall for support, and gazed up at him. Her heart skipped a beat.

Spock looked at her. "I beg your pardon," he said politely, blinked, recalled her name from the files. "Nurse Chapel."

She flushed and stammered. "S..sir, it was my fault."

He bowed slightly. "No, it was mine. Excuse me."

Christine stared after him as he walked away. She noticed his lithe, catlike walk, his slim but powerful body, and her knees felt weak. She smiled. Life on this ship was surely going to be full of interest.

McCoy was not convinced by Kirk's approval of the Vulcan, but he did not pursue the matter. He decided to change the subject.

"What are you going to do about Gary?"

Kirk sighed. He had forgotten about Gary for a while. "He will stay in the brig for a day to cool off, maybe see some sense. I don't care who he is, he will not defy me in such an insolent manner. He will not question my decisions with the voice of prejudice."

"I've just spoken to him," McCoy said. "He is very upset. He knows that he let you down badly. He said that you would not accept his apology."

"No, I didn't."

"Jim, he was close to tears," McCoy said urgently. "Gary was just about in tears. I've never seen him so... so remorseful. You can't let him suffer like this."

Kirk felt his anger at McCoy return. "What about the way he treated me? I'm his Captain, his commanding officer, and he calls my decisions into question in front of my crew. He has no respect, no sense of duty. If I allow this to continue, he could undermine my authority. A Captain must have the respect of his crew. When I think of the respect I get from my non-human Science Officer and the extent of his assistance - and this is someone I hardly know. Gary is my oldest friend, a man who has been my confidant for years, and I know him less now than I know my Vulcan First Officer." He stood up. "Discipline on this ship is my problem. Allow me to deal with it."

McCoy stared up at him. "I know he needs taking down a peg or two..."

"Exactly, Bones. I'm going to do just that before it gets out

of hand."

Spock reached the safety of his quarters, and immediately prepared for meditation. He sat, trying to find the calmness he would need, but it eluded him. Kirk's words reverberated in his mind. He had total recall, and every word, every gesture replayed itself. He paced the floor. His life had been well ordered until Kirk had entered into it; now it was becoming more and more complicated. The Captain had shaken him badly today. He took a deep breath. He was a Vulcan. He was not going to let a Human disturb his tranquillity in this manner. Friendship with a Human? Impossible... he must strengthen his barriers. He must control his annoying Human traits. He must be a Vulcan... yet even a Vulcan must recognise his Captain's wishes, and do his best to carry out his orders. Kirk had not ordered him to train him in Tzunarr, he had not ordered him to dine with him, but he had asked, and it would have been ill mannered to refuse. The Human was reaching out to him on a level he did not understand. Spock knew that he was sorely tempted to reach out and take the friendship Kirk was offering, and he was afraid.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kirk knew that he could not put the meeting with Gary off forever. He could not keep him in the brig any longer; he would have to face him, hope that he had learned his lesson. He waited until after his next training session and meal with Spock, then invited the First Officer to his quarters.

"I want you here when I see Mitchell," he said.

Spock did not understand it - surely it was a personal matter between the Captain and Mitchell - but he made no comment. He did not realise that Kirk wanted him there to impress Mitchell with his alienness, and for the support of his presence.

Two security men brought Mitchell to the Captain's quarters. Mitchell was edgy. During his time in the brig there had been no word from Jim except an order to study a course on alien life. He had spent many hours on it, but he had also had time to think on the behaviour which had put him there, and of the Captain who had confined him. On their last ship Jim would never have done such a thing, but he, Gary, would not have spouted such defiance. He did not know if Jim had relented yet, but he had never known him to be such a tough disciplinarian; of course, wise men did not defy him in the manner he had done.

They entered Kirk's cabin, and Mitchell was horrified to see the Vulcan standing at Kirk's side. He stood to attention while Kirk dismissed Security, and waited, hoping that he would dismiss the First Officer as well. He did not.

"Well, Mr. Mitchell," Kirk snapped, "have you spent your time in the brig constructively? Did you study Mr. Spock's course?"

"Yes, sir, I did," Mitchell said. He swallowed. Jim was still so angry with him. Where was the usually understanding friend?

"And what did you learn?"

Gary cleared his throat. "That... only a small percentage of life is Human, sir, and..." He glanced at Spock, seeing his sternness, then at Kirk, seeing his unyielding stare, and he focused on a point on the wall. He could not look at either of them. "A further higher percentage are humanoid, but there are many species of intelligent, non-humanoid life."

"What else?" Kirk demanded.

"All should be respected, sir. We must see their points of view, abide by their customs, seek a common ground."

"Very good, Mr. Mitchell," Kirk said, his voice scornful. "It is what we were all taught at the Academy. I wonder why you forgot it?"

Spock watched his Captain with real surprise. He could not believe the Human's coldness to his friend. He would not have understood that Kirk wanted to talk with Mitchell, reason with him as one equal to another, as a friend, but was held back by the worry of showing favouritism, and his further fear that Mitchell had not really repented.

"I do not know, sir," Mitchell answered his Captain's question. "But I will not forget again."

He dared a glance at Jim, and shuddered on seeing the hostility in his eyes. He felt a lump in his throat, and his eyes began to fill. He blinked back the tears. He would not break down... he could not...

Kirk sat down, only too aware of the reddening of Gary's eyes. Could he go through with this?

"You had better not, Mister, or else I'll boot you down to ensign so fast you won't know what hit you."

"Yes, sir," Mitchell whispered despairingly. He bent his head, trying desperately to hide his feelings.

Kirk looked up at his First Officer, and Spock saw the strain on his face. He remembered the cheerful and relaxed man of only twenty minutes ago as they had finished their meal. What could he do to help Kirk? He was First Officer, it was his duty to take responsibility for discipline also.

"Mr. Mitchell," he said sharply, and startled, Mitchell glanced at him, could not face his eyes, then looked down again.

"Yes, sir," he said.

"You have an excellent record, apart from some minor infractions, but the Captain will not tolerate such irresponsible behaviour from one of his senior officers. We are expected to set an example to the crew. You, in the privileged position of being the Captain's friend, have even more responsibility."

Kirk looked at him with interest, glad of the respite, for he was already emotionally drained.

"Captain Kirk expects a higher standard of behaviour from you, and that is something which you should give willingly. It is his right, and it is your duty to him. That is what should be foremost

in your mind at all times. It should be reflected in your every action aboard this ship. He is your commanding officer and his wishes are paramount. His position as Captain should not be jeopardised by any action taken by you."

A sense of determination encompassed Kirk. If this was Spock's concept of friendship, then he was more desperate than ever to make the Vulcan his friend. If Spock was his friend, and practised those ideals, then he truly would be master of the Enterprise. Spock's friendship would be a rock he could lean on. He needed that. He wanted that. He would win the Vulcan over, no matter what it took. He drew strength from the First Officer's words.

"Well, Mr. Mitchell?" he said.

Mitchell's shame threatened to overcome him. How could he have failed Jim like this?

"Captain," he said hoarsely, "Mr. Spock is right. Once again I offer you my apology, and I... beg... you to accept."

He could not stop the tear which slid down his face. He could not even wipe it away, for he had to stay at attention; he had not been given permission to stand at ease.

"I will do my utmost to gain your trust in me again. I will be worthy of that trust."

Kirk sighed deeply. He could not hold his anger at Gary any longer. He could not bear to see him so unhappy.

"I accept your apology. You may return to duty."

He looked down at the floor, trying to control the urge to comfort his friend. He remembered the Gary who had saved his life, the laughing, joking Gary of Academy days, the friend who had been as close to him as his own brother.

Mitchell let out a shuddering breath. Jim had accepted his apology, but had he really forgiven him? He felt emotion overcome him. He had to know, he could not leave this room not knowing. He forgot the Vulcan was there, he cast aside his inhibitions, and taking a few steps forward, he dropped to one knee by Kirk's chair and touched his arm.

"Jim," he whispered. "Jim... "

The Captain's clear hazel eyes looked at him in amazement. "Gary?"

Tears burst from Gary's eyes. "I'm sorry, Jim... I'm sorry."

He pressed his face against Jim's shoulder, sobbing harshly as all the months of recovery, the hurt of not being chosen as Jim's First Officer, his irresponsible behaviour, and Jim's punishment all combined in a moment of unendurable pain. Shocked, Jim put his arms around him.

"Gary," he murmured, "it's all right." His voice caught. Had he been so harsh on Gary, to break him like this? He had never intended that.

Spock, caught unawares, fought to maintain his composure. The

emanations coming from the Humans were so intense that they caused him an almost physical pain. He watched them with fascination and a certain awe. How could Kirk draw such an extreme response from Mitchell? His punishment did not seem to Spock to be severe enough to merit such a display, even for a Human.

Mitchell stayed there for only a few minutes until his tears were spent. Embarrassed and humiliated by his own behaviour, he wrenched himself from Kirk's arms and stood up. He brushed the tears from his face.

"Permission to leave, Captain," he said.

Kirk stared up at him compassionately. "Granted," he said, his voice hoarse. Mitchell left quickly.

"Well, Mr. Spock," Kirk said after a long moment. "I'm sorry you were witness to such a display of emotion." He stood up and drew a hand over his eyes. "I did not expect anything like that to happen."

Curiosity gnawed at the Vulcan. "Why would he do such a thing?"

"Why?" Kirk shrugged. "Guilt, shame... I hadn't realised that my putting him in the brig would be so hard on him."

He faced the First Officer. "He and I have been like brothers, but I did not realise the extent of his feelings for me."

"Is that what you Humans call love?" Spock asked. "The motivation, the feeling behind friendship."

"Yes," Kirk said with a slight smile. "You saw it there in all its rawness."

"It appears to cause much distress."

"Indeed, it can," Kirk said. "But at other times it is the most glorious feeling of all."

"It is most peculiar, Captain."

"It is indeed," Kirk said with a soft chuckle. He sat on the edge of his desk, weary now.

"Relationships between people can be most trying. I'm glad you were here. You gave me excellent support." He paused, wondering whether to ask, then made up his mind. "What you said to him. Do you really believe he is privileged to be my friend?"

Spock knew he was on dangerous ground, but he had to answer truthfully. "Indeed, sir."

Jim smiled with real pleasure, and Spock attempted to maintain his shields against that particular smile. It had been directed at him before. It had a quality to it that was difficult to ignore. Relentlessly he drove down the feeling it inspired in him, a feeling he did not know was called friendship.

"I wish you would be my friend," Jim said.

"I know nothing of feelings, sir, they are alien to me. I do

not understand Human friendship."

"So you have told me, but you know of respect. You give me respect."

"The respect due to a commanding officer, sir."

"It has nothing to do with feelings?"

"Not to a Vulcan, sir."

Kirk sighed, seeing it was useless, but he stared at Spock intently. "One day, Spock, I promise you, we will be friends. I know it."

The Vulcan was silent. He had no answer to give.

Kirk sniffed and rubbed at his eyes again. He would never have believed that the brash, confident Gary would have been so humble. He looked at the Vulcan and touched his arm. "Thank you for your support."

He felt the slight stiffening of Spock's muscles, and quickly removed his hand.

"If you will excuse me, sir," Spock said.

"Very well," Kirk said disappointedly.

He watched Spock leave the room. What had his enigmatic First Officer meant when he had said Gary was privileged to be his friend? Why was he persistently refusing to acknowledge that he would be Kirk's friend? Kirk wondered if he would ever understand Spock, and why he was so desperate for the Vulcan's friendship. He had never in his life had to fight for anyone's regard, he made friends easily. Was Spock a challenge to him? He shook his head; he would never force himself upon anyone. He tried to be honest with himself. He admired and liked the Vulcan, and wanted his total support. He would persist. One day, he had promised Spock, one day they would be friends. It was a gut instinct and they were always right. Kirk relied on such instincts, and had done in all his years in Starfleet. They had never let him down yet. He smiled, put it from his mind, and returned his thoughts to Gary. Things could not be left as they were.

Mitchell was surprised to see Kirk at his door. "Captain," he said. "Come in."

Kirk walked in. "I came to see if you were all right."

Mitchell shrugged. "I'm fine. I've only been reprimanded and humiliated by my old friend Captain James T. Kirk."

"Gary," Kirk protested, "you were not humiliated."

Mitchell stared down at the floor. "Why was the Vulcan there? Did you want him to reprimand me too? Couldn't you handle it by yourself?"

It had been a mistake coming here, Kirk realised. He was just making things worse. Gary's attitude had not changed. He turned

and headed for the door.

Mitchell, on seeing his face, realised he had angered him again. He dived in front of him, remorseful again. "Jim," he began.

Kirk, furious with him, grabbed his arm, twisted it up his back, and slammed him up against the wall. "I came here to make things right between us; you persist in angering me. I don't know what the hell is wrong with you, but I do not have to put up with it."

Mitchell groaned as pain shot up his arm. Kirk was strong. Mitchell had not beaten him in unarmed combat for years.

"Damn you," Kirk said as he realised what he was doing. He released Gary and looked down at his hands, flexing them. "I shouldn't have lost my temper. You are not worth it. I have more important things to do with my time."

Mitchell turned around. "I don't know why you bother with me."

Kirk stared at him, suddenly seeing his insecurity. He sighed. "You are my friend, you saved my life."

"I'm also a pain in the ass."

Kirk could not hold back his laughter at that remark, and the last of his anger disappeared. "That's true," he agreed.

Mitchell grinned, but after a moment he became serious. He had to show Jim he was sincere. "I appreciate that I have made life very difficult for you. I accept that you had to make an example of me. I regret that I was not man enough to accept that discipline." He chewed at his lip. "I never thought you could be so tough, Jim."

"Neither did I, Gary."

"You made me beg, Jim."

"I didn't, Gary. You did it."

"Shocked you, didn't I?"

"Shocked yourself," Kirk retaliated.

"Yes," Mitchell said. "I may never recover from it."

He grinned and held out his hand. Kirk took it.

"No more problems, Gary. Please...."

"No more problems, Captain friend," Mitchell said. "I will take your First Officer's recommendation and put you first for a change."

Kirk wished he could believe him, but he knew that it would take time for his trust in Gary to be restored. He felt so alone. Gary was the only one on board he knew well, and he could not be trusted. He wondered how he was going to endure the burden of command. The only time he felt at ease was when he was with Spock, but even that was strangely unsatisfying. The Vulcan was still so withdrawn. He became aware of Gary's voice.

"Hey, let's go to the gym, we can unwind."

Kirk shook his head. "I'm on duty, and I have already been there. Spock is giving me a regular workout. He is a tough taskmaster and a lot stronger than I am."

A strong feeling of jealousy surged through Mitchell, but he tried not to show it. "Okay, Jim, another time."

He clasped Kirk's hand between his own.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It took another four solar days for the Enterprise to reach Athene 2, but Kirk felt more relaxed than he had been in a long time. Mitchell was trying hard to behave and had caused no further problems. The ship was running flawlessly, and the crew were working efficiently. Spock was relentlessly training Kirk in Tzunarr, the Vulcan children's discipline, and Kirk was enjoying every minute of it. Already he was feeling the benefits of it; all his tensions had disappeared, and although physically tired after the bouts, he soon regained his energy.

Afterwards they would shower and dine, and Kirk felt a camaraderie grow, though he was not sure if it was one-sided or not. He was never entirely sure if the Vulcan was enjoying his role as teacher, or if he was aware of his Captain's pleasure in his company. They would talk of many subjects during their meals, and Kirk grew more impressed with his Science Officer's great knowledge.

To his surprise, Spock found himself more at ease with Kirk than he had ever been with any other being. Kirk treated him with respect combined with an easy familiarity, a way no one had been with him before. The Captain was an apt pupil, and Spock could see the rapid improvement in the six days since they had started the training. He found himself looking forward to the sessions, but it was not only the gym he looked forward to but the meals afterwards. There he would listen to his Captain tell him about his previous missions, his hopes and dreams for the future, and somehow it seemed to be the logical thing to do, to sit there and converse with him.

"Am I improving?" Kirk asked, as they sat at the table.

"Indeed, sir, you are making excellent progress."

Spock noted the genuine delight on Kirk's face, and added, "I am convinced that in the near future you will be able to implement a throw."

Kirk's eyes widened. "You think so?"

"I do, Captain," he replied, watching with interest as Kirk bounced about in his chair with a boyish happiness. *What had he said to cause such a reaction? Would he ever understand this man?*

"I'm going to work at it until I do. Don't go easy on me, Spock. I may have need of those skills one day."

"Indeed, you may, sir."

Kirk leaned forward. "Are you ready for chess?"

"Indeed, sir, if you wish it."

"Good. Playing chess with you stimulates my thinking processes. I'm determined to beat you again."

Spock raised an eyebrow. It was also intellectually stimulating for him. His Captain's unorthodox chess playing was a challenge to him, and he had almost fallen into several traps in their last game. Until Kirk, he had not played with a Human for many years, for no Human liked to be outmanoeuvred so easily. Instead he had played with computers, but machines were limited, unable to leap beyond their programming.

Captain Kirk was a different matter. He was unpredictable in his play, making moves no Vulcan would. Spock's admiration for him grew however, not only because of his occasional brilliant play, but because of the way he accepted defeat, not with ill humour or resentment, but with a keen interest in analysing Spock's game, and by his determination to learn from him.

"Maybe I was just plain lucky," Kirk continued. "I have never played with anyone of your quality before."

"Your play is erratic but you show promise, sir."

"Why, thank you," Kirk said with a grin. "That is a compliment - but I cannot deny it, it is not pleasant being outmatched, doesn't do much for the ego; but it's the only way to learn, and I want to learn." He suddenly grimaced. "Anyway, it will help, along with the exercise training, to keep me from thinking myself all powerful. The command seat is a very potent symbol of complete authority. I do not want to be corrupted by power, the way other Starship Captains have."

The Vulcan looked at his Captain with new respect. The youngest Captain in the history of Starfleet Kirk might be, but he was not inexperienced, nor was he arrogant like his friend Mitchell. He showed respect for all life-forms, and possessed a maturity beyond his years. Most Human Starship commanders were over 40 Earth years old, when it was judged that they had left the follies of youth behind and were ready to take on the responsibilities of command. There had been too many mistakes in the past when younger Captains had run their ships unwisely, and had led their ships and crews into disasters.

Kirk had to be exceptional for the Admiralty to have given him the Enterprise, but Spock pondered anew on their decision to accept himself as First Officer instead of Kirk's own choice. Perhaps someone had seen that the young Captain, mature and responsible though he was, would need the cautionary and logical advice of a Vulcan.

"I do not believe, sir, that power will corrupt you. The fact that you are aware of the risk shows that you will not be tempted."

"You think so?" Kirk asked with a grin. "I hope you are right."

"Vulcans are always correct on such matters," Spock replied, as if he was lecturing him.

Kirk laughed out loud, causing people at the other tables to stare at them. "Mr. Spock, you have made my day."

"Sir," Spock said in the same tone. "You are being illogical. A day cannot be made. It is..." He stopped as Kirk laughed again. He could not stop the slight frown from settling on his face. Why was the Captain laughing? It was illogical. Kirk was illogical. Humans were illogical.

"Oh, Spock," Kirk said after a few moments. "You are good for me."

"Indeed, Captain," Spock said, his tone puzzled. "I am honoured."

"Come on, let's go have that game of chess, we have only three hours before we arrive at Athene."

"We arrive at Athene 2 in three point two hours, sir," Spock corrected.

"Three point two hours," Kirk said with another grin, amused by the Vulcan's exactness.

"Correct, sir."

"If you say so," Kirk replied, getting to his feet.

Spock immediately stood, and when Kirk moved to the door, he followed him.

Gary Mitchell, sitting at a table with McCoy, watched them go, his eyes full of annoyance. Somehow he had lost Jim's confidence, and try as he might, it was difficult to approach his old friend. He told himself it was the responsibility of Jim's command which had changed things between them, but nagging at him was his conscience which told him how he had failed Jim at crucial points. He would have to work hard at gaining Jim's respect again. He had grown so used to the relaxed camaraderie with him that when it was not there, he missed it badly. Mitchell chewed at his lip, resenting the Vulcan who seemed to be with Jim at all times.

He had gone to the gym today to see one of the famous sessions between Jim and Mr. Spock, hoping that he could perhaps join in, and had watched as the Vulcan had taken Jim through a seemingly impossible set of moves. To his amazement, Jim, taking fall after fall, only seemed exhilarated. At one point Jim had slid and gone down towards a landing which could have broken his neck, but the Vulcan, in an amazingly speedy response, had grabbed his Captain round the body and had set him on his feet. Mitchell had seen the gratitude on Jim's face, had heard his heartfelt thanks. He had left after that.

McCoy's words interrupted his thoughts. "Trust Jim. Only he could take on a being with no emotion and make him recognise his charisma."

"Jim is the most charismatic person I have ever met," Mitchell said. "Maybe even a Vulcan can recognise that."

McCoy shook his head. "Mr. Spock scares the hell outta me. Y'know, when he looks at you with that stare of his."

"I know," Mitchell said with a shudder, remembering the time in Jim's cabin. "It's as if he can see what is going on in your mind."

"Doesn't seem to bother Jim."

"Jim has always been fascinated with aliens, Bones, you know that."

"That alien is too damn strong. I'm worried about Jim being injured."

A

Mitchell was silent, remembering how Jim had been saved from a nasty fall by the Vulcan's speed and strength. He had seen how Jim had thrown himself so trustingly into difficult and dangerous exercises. He thought about all the years he had known Jim Kirk and how Jim always had the knack for understanding others, and wondered what he had seen in the cold, aloof First Officer.

The Captain tipped his king, acknowledging defeat, sat back and grinned. Spock regarded him, searching for resentment, anger, humiliation over the defeat. He found none. It was most curious. Jim stretched his arms above his head. He felt great. Once again he realised how alive he felt around Spock. He met the dark eyed, curious stare of the First Officer.

"Can't wait for a rematch," he said. "I'm a glutton for punishment."

"I beg your pardon, sir?" Spock asked, not understanding.

"Just an expression," Kirk said, unsure how to explain it.

The call from Mr. Scott on the bridge came just in time. They were in orbit around Athene 2. Kirk called a meeting of department heads.

CHAPTER NINE

The officers assembled in the main briefing room and waited for Kirk. Spock called up all available data on the survey team, and on the planet Athene 2. It was an experienced scientific group, all specialists in their fields. For ten such Vulcans to have been out of communication for so long did not bode well. The planet was a class M world, suitable for humanoid life, but it was a desert world, more comfortable for Vulcans than for Humans. The team had reported once since their arrival, but the details were sparse. They had found ruins which indicated that once there had been a civilisation there. However, they had not found any indication of intelligent life as yet.

Kirk entered, and immediately Spock rose and the others quickly followed. Mitchell was last; he scrambled awkwardly to his feet.

Kirk noted everything. "Be seated," he said.

He listened to the various reports and did not like what he heard. A Vulcan survey team, the best in the Federation, out of contact for over a year. Vulcans, the most intelligent and, he now knew, the strongest people in the Federation.

He made his decision. "I will head a landing party, consisting of Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy and three security people. We will beam down in thirty minutes."

Spock was surprised. He disagreed, but was unsure how to tell the Captain of his objections. He must speak out it was his duty as First Officer.

"Captain, it is unwise for the Captain and First Officer to both be on the landing party. The situation on Athene 2 could be highly dangerous. We could both be killed. I, as the First Officer, am more expendable..."

Kirk interrupted. He had to take control, had to show that he was the commanding officer. "Mr. Spock, I am not the kind of Captain who can lead from the bridge. It is not my way, and you will have to get used to it. I will be going on the landing party. This planet and the missing team are my responsibility. I must be there to judge the situation at first hand. I want you there because you are a Vulcan and my Science Officer; Dr. McCoy's presence is self explanatory, and the three security men is the standard precautionary measure. Do you still object?"

Mitchell covered a grin. He had seen Jim override this objection before. He wondered how a Vulcan First Officer would deal with it. Would he be intimidated by the Captain? Could a Vulcan be intimidated?

Taken aback by the suddenly assertive Captain, Spock was silent for a few moments. There was a certain logic in Kirk's explanation, but Spock was unsure as to its validity. Surely it was more logical for one of them to be on the ship while the other headed the landing party. Yet the Captain had the final decision, he could only advise him. He could not force him to act in a different way unless he was in breach of regulations.

"I have given you my objections, sir. I stand by them but you are the Captain; the decision is yours."

Kirk breathed a sigh of relief. He had worried that Spock might try to stop him from beaming down, tie him up in regulations somehow. He had had to exert his authority on the matter and the Vulcan had accepted it, albeit reluctantly.

"Thank you," he said. "I welcome all your advice, your objections, any input you or any of my officers can give me. I will consider all of it." He hesitated. He had been abrupt in his treatment of the First Officer. There was no excuse for that. "Mr. Spock, I ask your pardon for interrupting you. It was ill mannered of me."

The people around the table looked at one another, interested in the confrontation, aware it was not the usual type of power struggle between a Captain and First Officer. It was something else entirely. Mitchell, who knew Kirk better than anyone, had seen his insecurity in the way he had spoken, but for Kirk then to apologise, showed that he cared very much for the Vulcan's opinion of him, and did not want to antagonise him.

Spock met his Captain's eyes. Kirk was like no commanding officer he had ever served with. Unpredictable, illogical, but willing to apologise in front of others if he felt he had been wrong. Spock inclined his head in acceptance of the apology. It would have been ill mannered of him to refuse.

Kirk smiled a little, stood, and immediately the others did too, all except Mitchell who, after a moment of startlement, jumped

to his feet as the Captain left.

Spock glared at Mitchell. "Please show the Captain proper respect, Mr. Mitchell, your responses are far too slow. You will stand when he comes into the room, and when he leaves. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," Mitchell said.

He let out a breath as Spock left. McCoy glanced at him with sympathy.

CHAPTER TEN

The heat on Athene 2 hit the Humans in the landing party full force. Spock found it pleasant, close to temperatures on Vulcan. They had beamed down to the co-ordinates of the survey team's base camp and found destruction; now they were searching amongst the rubble for any clues which would indicate what had happened. Spock's tricorder showed no Vulcan life signs within range. He knelt down to study a large piece of thermo-concrete which had once been part of the shelter used by the scientists.

"Captain," McCoy called. He pointed amongst the rubble and the officers followed his gaze towards a skull which sat there staring at them through empty eye sockets.

"The Vulcan science team," Spock stated, searching with his keen eyesight for other signs. He soon found them. "There, Captain," he indicated.

They had found the missing team, Kirk mused, but what had killed them and reduced their camp to this?

"Collect the remains, Doctor, and beam aboard; there is nothing further you can do here."

McCoy nodded and began his grisly task.

"Fan out," Kirk told the others. "Phasers on stun. Whatever or whoever has done this could still be close."

"There is nothing within range of my tricorder, Captain."

"Keep scanning."

They searched the surrounding area but found nothing apart from simple plant and animal life. Kirk surveyed the area, taking in the orange desert sands, the hot breeze, the glare of the sun, which seemed to have intensified in the time they had been here. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. There were some large rocks some seventy five metres away, but nothing hid there out of the sun's heat.

"There are no records, Captain," Spock remarked. "Vulcan scientific teams keep meticulous records. For them to be taken or destroyed by their attackers is most disquieting."

None of them noticed the flying creatures above them until it was too late. Spock called out a warning, the first to realise they were under attack, but the creatures were upon them before they had

a chance to defend themselves. Large, powerful wings beat them down. The stench of decay choked their senses. Half stunned, Kirk was aware that he was being stripped of his phaser and communicator. Hands tipped with sharp claws prodded and scratched him. He struggled violently, trying to fight, but the strength of the attacker overpowered him.

After a short time he was allowed to slump to the ground. He tried to breathe in fresh air, but the stink of the creatures remained in his nostrils and he fought to keep from retching. He glanced over and found his men. Spock lay nearby, green blood running from a cut on his arm. Kirk stared at it for a moment. He had never seen green blood before! The three security men were lying stunned, further away. Large, humanoid beings with giant, vulture-like wings stood over them menacingly. Kirk tried to clear his head.

"Captain." He heard Spock's voice beside him. He looked up to see that the First Officer had managed to cross the distance between them. "They have taken our phasers and communicators, but have left me my tricorder. I will set the universal translator."

"Yes, maybe we can talk to them." He tried to sit up, but waves of nausea overtook him. "Help me stand."

"Yes, sir," Spock said, taking hold of his Captain's arm. He half lifted him to his feet.

Kirk wavered and Spock kept a hold of him until he saw that he was steady, then stood a pace behind him and adjusted the tricorder.

Kirk faced the being who stood nearest to him. Something in its stance alerted him to the fact that it was leader. He stared at it, noting its leathery wings, its painted humanoid body, its dangerous-looking fangs, its large oval yellow eyes, the long unkept hair floating in the desert breeze, the awful stench from its body. He stood straight.

"I am Captain James T. Kirk. These are my men. We are on a rescue mission, we search for people who look like this man." He indicated Spock. "Can you assist us?"

The being's mouth opened to reveal sharp pointed teeth, and a long, forked tongue. "Welcome, Captain. It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Xan."

Kirk had not quite expected that, and he felt a sudden hope.

"The others," Xan continued, "like the one who stands at your side, were stringy, tough, thin. You and these others," he pointed to the security people, "will make a tastier meal."

A chill went down Kirk's spine. "You cannot eat Human flesh!"

"We are predators, we are carnivorous, we like to kill and eat the flesh of warm blooded creatures. It is a delicacy for us."

Jim swallowed. He searched the Vulcan's eyes and met them. Spock's gaze steadied him, and he turned to face the alien.

"If it is meat you want, we can supply it. There is no need to take life."

The alien laughed, a hissing, guttural sound. "We do not want dead meat, we prefer it alive. Fear gives it a particularly pungent flavour."

His eyes raked over Kirk. Saliva dripped from his mouth. The tongue slid over the sharp, pointed fangs.

"There is no logic in that, sir," Spock said, stepping forward, effectively covering his Captain's body with his own. "We have the ability to supply you with meat. Why do you wish to kill when it is unnecessary? To take life indiscriminately is not in keeping with your intelligence."

The creature hissed. "You will see the pleasure we take in killing, for I will leave you to the last, after I have tasted the succulent ones."

It came to Kirk that Spock was physically shielding him. He had suddenly realised the meaning of the alien's words and looks. The very physique he had worked so hard to achieve and maintain was too much of a temptation to a carnivore with a taste for Human flesh. He scanned the area for a phaser, a communicator; they had to get out of this situation at once.

Xan signalled to the others who brought forward the three struggling, terrified security men. He eyed each one of them, then pointed a talon at the young Frenchman, Lafayette.

"No!" Kirk cried, darting forward.

"Captain...." Lafayette shouted.

Spock followed his Captain, but on a command from the alien leader, they were both enclosed in a circle of winged beings, the large wings spreading out to form a barrier. They tried to break through again and again, but were continually thrown back onto the ground. Pain lanced through Kirk's body as the rough treatment took its toll, causing bruises and strains and worse. He threw himself once again at the creatures as he heard Lafayette screaming his name. He was roughly thrown onto the sand and lay there, exhaustion and fear overcoming him.

Spock launched himself at one of their captors with all of his Vulcan strength, but a leathery wing cuffed him, and he went flying across the circle to land heavily on the ground, his tricorder smashing underneath him.

"Spock!" Kirk exclaimed. He crawled over to him. "Spock!"

The Vulcan sat up carefully. "I am functional, Captain."

He struggled to his feet, and Kirk putting an arm around his back, tried to help him. They both stood shakily.

"Captain!" came the piercing scream of the young security man.

Kirk watched helplessly as Xan pounced on Lafayette, his fangs ripping open his throat. As if in a nightmare he saw the boy's blood pour from the open wound.

Singh and Assad, the other two men, struggled in the arms of two of the aliens. They cried out in horror, knowing that this was also their fate.

"Captain," Singh moaned. "Help us...."

Tears streamed down Kirk's face; he had never been so helpless in his life, his men were crying out to him. He slid to his knees and bent his head to the ground in total weakness.

The sight of their comrade being killed and now eaten with relish was too much even for the tough men of Starfleet security. They slumped in the arms of their captors and mercifully before their time to die had come, they had fallen into a dead faint.

Kirk retched in gut wrenching fear and horror as his men were dismembered and eaten. The sounds of Xan's crunching sent deep waves of nausea through him. Sickness from deep inside him rose, threatening to overcome him completely. Lafayette's piercing screams still sounded in his ears, he was trembling, losing total control, the nightmare of seeing his men suffer such a death too much to bear.

"Captain." Spock's voice penetrated urgently.

He had seen Kirk's face go white, sensed the waves of horror from him; he could not shut them out and they added to his own intolerable burden. He drew on reserves he had never tapped before. Now, when it was important to be a Vulcan, he had to find control, screen out what was happening to the men, for there was nothing he could do for them. His duty was to his Captain. He must try to help Kirk.

"Spock," Jim Kirk whispered, holding on to his First Officer's voice like a drowning man. Blindly he reached out.

The Vulcan knelt opposite his Captain and did something he had never attempted to do before. He grabbed the Human's shoulders tightly, and tried to pass through the touch some of his own strength. To do this, he had to lower certain mental barriers. He fought to retain his other barriers, the ones which guarded his inner self. He had to draw on disciplines learned but never practised; it was difficult. He concentrated on easing his Captain's horror and fear, and to do this he had to take it within himself and conquer it. As he did this, he realised that without consciously knowing it, he had given this man his loyalty. He wondered when it had happened, and if Kirk himself had known. He filed away his many questions for another time, if they lived.

Jim Kirk allowed himself to lean on the Vulcan, aware on some deep level that he was being helped. He clasped Spock's arm convulsively and breathed deeply. Slowly he was able to shut out his surroundings until only two people were in his existence, himself and Spock. Steadily the sickness faded until it was at a tolerable level. He opened his eyes and met the sympathetic gaze of the non-emotional Vulcan. He desperately wanted to speak with him, thank him, but the sense of being alone with Spock disappeared as a sudden movement caught his eye.

Xan, finished with his feast, had now allowed some of the others to finish the remains of the Humans. He moved deliberately towards Kirk but the circle around the officers had dispersed. The winged beings hissed at their leader, talking in their guttural tongue. He spat at them, spreading his wings to their maximum, shaking his taloned hands at them as they approached him menacingly.

"Back," Kirk ordered.

He did not dare to look at the remains of his men. Slowly he and Spock edged away, scanning the area for anything to help them. Spock caught the glint of sunlight reflecting off metal. He touched Kirk's shoulder, then pointed to where not twenty metres away a phaser lay, half buried in the sand. Kirk nodded and both of them started towards it, but their movements had been noticed and Xan, with a horrendous shriek, swooped on Kirk, knocking him to the ground. He swiped at Spock with his wing and the Vulcan fell, his head hitting the ground.

Kirk shuddered violently. Xan's face was perilously close; his fangs, wet with the blood of Kirk's men, touched his face. The odour from Xan's mouth overpowered Kirk with its foulness. The alien's claws raked at his body, cutting deep. He cried out in agony as his chest was torn open.

"Spock...." he screamed as he went down into darkness and death.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The alien shuddered as blows pounded his back. Kirk felt the reverberations through Xan's body and fought to retain consciousness. Spock... it was Spock... He mustered as much strength as he could and when he felt the pressure of Xan's body lift slightly, he tried to add his own punches. It was hopeless. He was still pinned down under Xan, he must try to get away... His chance came a few moments later when the alien lifted himself around to reach his attacker. Kirk slid from under him, rolled over onto his stomach and crawled away painfully.

He tried to focus his eyes and although his vision was blurred, he saw with great satisfaction that the Vulcan hammered the alien with powerful two-handed blows. The blood pounded in his head. Where was the damn phaser? He looked around; where was it? Where had they seen it? He searched the area but he was almost blinded with his own weakness and the swirling sand which flew into his eyes. He noted that the other aliens appeared to have gone, but did not stop to wonder why; he had to find the phaser.

Every move was agonising, but he forced himself to crawl over the ground, his hands raking over the sand, searching. He was bleeding profusely now, but he was not aware of it. He was focused on one thing only. Where was it? His hand closed over a familiar shape. Clenching his teeth he brought the weapon close to his face and set it to killing force. He aimed... Weakness overtook him, and his vision faded.

"No...." he murmured, concentrating as he had never done before. His vision began to clear.

"Spock," he gasped, his urgent tone penetrating to the sensitive hearing of the Vulcan.

Spock leaped out of the way, and Kirk, seeing that he was out of range of the phaser blast, fired.

Xan let out a piercing yell, then disintegrated into nothingness.

Kirk dropped his head onto his hands as faintness overcame

him. The blood pounded in his ears, deafening him. The serious wounds he had received bled continuously. He was going to die, here on this barren world, before he had been able to fulfil his dream of starship command. He was going to die....

He felt himself being lifted and the blackness receded as he looked up into the concerned face of his First Officer.

"Spock," he whispered. "We have to find a communicator."

"I will try," Spock said. "However, a search will be made for us in approximately twenty minutes if we do not communicate with Mr. Scott."

He pulled his shirt off, tore strips from it and tried to staunch the Captain's wounds. He knew that Kirk was losing too much blood.

"We are safe for the moment. The other aliens have flown away. They appear to have had a dispute with Xan, but if they do return, at least we have the phaser. Hold on to it, sir, while I search."

Jim nodded. He tried to hold onto awareness but the pain was becoming unendurable.

Anxiously Spock searched. He did not go far from his Captain, always keeping him in sight, aware he was in severe pain, and now with the sun reaching its zenith in the alien sky the heat would be intolerable for a Human, especially a wounded Human. He abandoned the search. He had to get Kirk to shelter. Perhaps the rock would afford certain shade. There they could await the search party.

"Captain," he said, kneeling by him, "you must get out of the sun's glare. Can you walk?"

Kirk's lips were caked and dry; he tried to moisten them. "No," he whispered hoarsely. "I don't think so."

He tried to sit up, but his body refused to obey him. He moaned with pain as a fresh surge of blood stained the strips of cloth around him.

There was only one logical course for Spock to follow. He took the phaser from Kirk's nerveless grasp, then bent, and as carefully as he could, lifted the Captain in his arms. A wave of pain shot through Kirk. He cried out, clung onto Spock for support, but the shocks caught up with him at last and he passed out into merciful oblivion.

As speedily as he could, Spock carried his Captain to the shelter of the rocks. He collapsed down against the cool stone, weak from his own injuries, but Jim Kirk was still securely cradled against him. Spock eased him back slightly and looked down at his face. He did not like the Human's pallor. He touched his forehead, feeling the clamminess of his skin then studied the wounds he had so hastily tried to bind; the cloth was stained with both their blood.

He had medical knowledge and he even knew the basics of Vulcan healing. He had to do something more for Kirk, or else he would die. Taking a deep breath he concentrated on the touch, carefully letting a tendril of the healing gift ease its way into the Captain's mind and body. Kirk stirred in his unconsciousness, but

did not awaken. Cautiously, Spock probed a little deeper, and tried to initiate the beginnings of the healing process.

"Spock," Kirk murmured, stirring further.

Quickly, Spock withdrew, afraid he had been discovered. It was not unusual for Vulcan healers to enter the unconscious minds of their patients, but he was not a healer, and all the restrictions about invading another's privacy were deeply instilled in him.

He watched Kirk, still holding him, afraid to move him in case he might cause him to bleed more and thus endanger him further. He checked his time sense. Fourteen minutes until Mr. Scott, not having received word from them would send down a search party. All he could do now was wait, something all Vulcans were skilled at. He leaned his head back against the stone and reflected that he had somehow become closer to this Human in a few short weeks than he had been to any other, apart from his mother, Amanda. He had given him his complete loyalty, and that had happened spontaneously, naturally, without his knowledge or even consent. He wondered if he had also given his friendship, and as yet did not realise that. Knowing nothing of friendship he had no comparison to make, yet he suddenly realised that he, who avoided any physical contact, had so easily accepted it from Kirk, first in the training bouts, today when he had with his touch eased the Captain's fears, and now, as he held him in his arms as if he was a child.

These realisations were decidedly uncomfortable. Spock put them aside and scanned the skies for any signs of the aliens, spotting them in the far distance. He checked his phaser, held the Captain securely to him and prepared to defend them both until the end. He glanced down and was startled to find Kirk's eyes open.

"Captain," he murmured. "I am with you, I will protect you with my life." He raised an eyebrow. What was he saying?

"Spock," Kirk said almost inaudibly.

Spock bent his head down, trying to catch the Captain's words. His eyes met the understanding gaze of the Human.

"Spock," came the hoarse whisper. "You were wrong when you said you have no friend." Kirk's eyes were wet. "I will always be your friend."

Those words pierced the barrier which Spock had worked so diligently to reinforce for years. The barriers which protected him from the unshielded emotions of Humans were in shreds now. He could not speak. Too much had happened this day, too much injury, too much exposure to this man's pain and suffering, and now his honest and deepfelt words. He stared for a long moment into the eyes of the Human who had done the damage, and could not find it in his heart to be angry. He sighed, returned his attention to the approaching menace, and took aim.

Once they were within range he fired, picking them out of the sky one by one, shutting out their shrieks as they died. He set aside Vulcan principles; they did not apply here. He was a Starfleet officer faced with a barbaric race who wanted to kill them for food. His only duty now was to the injured man in his arms. He calculated that the phaser power pack would not last long enough to kill all of the attackers, and could only hope that they would

withdraw, giving the search party enough time to find them; that was if the landing party themselves were not killed, a distinct possibility.

Jim Kirk lay in a cocoon of warmth. He listened to the fast beat of the Vulcan heart and he was not afraid. His pain had eased, he felt no discomfort from his wounds, but his weakness was intense. He did not try to move, he could not. Knowing that he must not disturb Spock in his attempts to defend them, the only thing he could do was to lie here, still and quiet. It was the only way he could help. He smiled to himself. He had won the Vulcan over after all, he knew for certain that he had. He relaxed, trusting his First Officer with his life, and closed his eyes, the Vulcan heartbeat soothing him. McCoy had never told him where Spock's heart was, but he knew now.

The aliens circled warily out of phaser range. Spock waited, not even daring to glance at his Captain. He knew that Kirk was aware, unable to move, but he was quiet and unafraid. Perhaps he did not realise the peril they were in, but he quickly dismissed that thought as illogical, and formulated another reason, one which made sense. The Human had accepted his lot and was prepared to die. Satisfied, he thought no more about it. He was himself not afraid to die, but the weight of the Human in his arms was oddly comforting. He dismissed that feeling as illogical.

As another alien approached he fired, but the flier swooped in an arc behind him and the beam missed. Something landed with a thud at his side. He stared at it in amazement for a moment - it was a communicator! He picked it up and flicked it open, the familiar electronic sounds greeting him. It still worked...

"Spock to Enterprise," he called. "Emergency, zero zero two. I repeat emergency zero zero two. Energise."

The winged creatures shrieked wildly; they had learned their lesson, and would attack en masse now. Too many of them had died as they had foolishly attacked singly, as was their way. The strange alien was too dangerous. Soon they would feed... Xan was dead. No more would he keep the succulent ones for himself. They flew towards their prey, but before they could reach the ground, the two alien creatures simply disappeared. Cries of anger and frustration filled the air. Their prey was gone.

One of the creatures landed at the spot on which the two aliens had made their stand. He searched for the device he had dropped to them. It was gone. He had been correct, it had helped them to escape. He was pleased. He was sick of the bloodlust and carnage. He had been impressed by the way the aliens had protected and defended one another and it made him curious. He was dissatisfied with the selfish, vicious ways of his people. The time for change had come. He would attempt to win the battle for leadership. If he won, he would persuade his people to embrace better ways. He spread his wings, and flew up to fight for leadership.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The transporter chief stared horrified as Commander Spock, shirtless, bleeding, holding in his arms an even more wounded and bloodied Captain Kirk, materialised on the platform. Spock staggered to his feet. There was no time to waste; he could not

wait for the medical team to arrive, he would have to take the Captain to sickbay himself.

"Sickbay alert," he snapped. "I'm on my way. Clear the corridors."

Speedily he carried the Captain to the turbolift as Kyle's voice echoed throughout the giant starship. The doors of the lift opened.

"Out," Spock ordered to the four crewmembers there. Quickly they complied. "Sickbay," Spock said wearily, and as the doors closed and the lift sped on its way, he closed his eyes for a moment, allowing relief to overtake him. He was back on the Enterprise, safe - but his Captain... had he got him aboard in time?

He opened his eyes and looked down. He gave a start as he saw Kirk had been watching him silently. He swallowed, and forced his mask of aloofness over his features.

"Captain, we will be at sickbay in a few moments."

He saw the smile in the Captain's piercing hazel eyes, and he quickly glanced up at the doors. They opened a moment later.

McCoy and a team of medics stood there with trolley and medical equipment. McCoy assessed the Captain's dangerous wounds in a moment; better not to move him unnecessarily.

"Can you take him to sickbay?" he asked.

Spock nodded, and quickly made his way along the corridor, the others running to catch up with him.

"Put him down carefully," McCoy said, trying to control his worry. Spock eased his Captain onto the diagnostic bed with extreme care, but Kirk let out a moan of pain as he lost the contact with the Vulcan.

"Spock," he whispered.

McCoy had noted Spock's injuries, but the Captain was his main concern.

"Someone attend to Mr. Spock," he ordered, and began to assess Kirk's injuries properly.

Dr. Piper hurried to treat Spock's cuts and bruises with the skill of many years of medical practice.

"No internal injuries, Mr. Spock," he said as he worked. "The bleeding was already beginning to stop before you got here, but I don't like the look of some of these bruises."

Spock paid him no heed, his attention was on the team surrounding the next bed. "Report on the Captain's condition, Doctor," he snapped.

McCoy turned to him. "Multiple bruises, severe sprains, broken bones, severe lacerations. What the hell did you come up against down there?"

"We were attacked by beings with talons. Check for infection."

"I have. I've given him a broad spectrum shot to cover infection. He has lost a lot of blood, he'll need a transfusion but I don't understand why some of the deepest lacerations are already beginning to heal." He shook his head - no time for that just now. "Dr. Piper, give Mr. Spock 10 ccs of Zenaphyl. I assume you were also attacked, Mr. Spock."

"Indeed, Doctor."

McCoy set up the transfusion. "Jim," he said, "I will have to put you under to deal with some of these wounds, but you will be all right, I promise you."

Kirk nodded. Already some of his strength was returning to him. He had to talk with his First Officer about the incidents on the planet first, there were so many unanswered questions. "Spock?" he murmured.

"He's right here," McCoy said soothingly. "His injuries are not too serious."

"Spock," Kirk demanded, trying to turn onto his side.

Mitchell rushed in. He saw the bed surrounded by medics and an awful fear took hold of him.

"Is Jim all right?" he cried.

Chapel turned to him as he pushed in beside her. "He will be all right, Gary. Mr. Spock brought him aboard in time."

"Jim," Mitchell said, horrified by the slashes and cuts on his friend's body, the lack of colour in his face.

"Spock," Kirk repeated, his voice pleading now.

"Yes, Captain."

Chapel caught her breath at the sight of the half-naked Vulcan who now stood facing her at the opposite side of the bed. His chest and arms were covered with cuts and bruises but he showed no signs of discomfort. It was at that moment she fell helplessly in love with him.

"Mr. Spock," Piper complained, "I'm not finished."

Spock ignored him. He stared past Chapel, his expression like stone. Kirk reached out and grabbed the Vulcan's wrist. Spock tried not to flinch as the Captain's pain, the intensity of his emotions crashed through his shattered defences.

"Spock, you saved my life."

"I did my duty, sir," Spock replied tonelessly.

Why had he not stayed away and allowed Piper to continue treating him? He did not understand. Something in Kirk's tone had compelled him to be here. He kept his eyes away from the figure in the bed.

Kirk smiled slightly. "You did more than your duty."

He stared up at the Vulcan, wondering why he would not meet his

eyes.

"Captain, you must allow the medical staff to treat you. I will assume command and send a report to Starfleet."

Frustrated by Spock's aloofness, so different from before, Kirk tugged at the bony wrist, exerting what little pressure he could.

"Spock," he said urgently. "Look at me."

It was said in the same tone as before, and reluctantly Spock met his Captain's gaze. It was with great difficulty that he kept his expression from changing when he saw the gratitude in Kirk's eyes.

"Thank you, Spock," Kirk said softly. "It is not enough to express how I feel, but words are inadequate."

All his admiration, his gratitude, and to Spock's complete startlement, a deep affection, flowed through the contact, and for the first time in the Vulcan's life he said words which surprised himself as much as any other in that room.

"When a Vulcan gives his loyalty to his commander, he will do his utmost to defend and protect that commander, or give his life in the attempt."

Kirk's smile was radiant and Spock, knowing the happiness he had caused, felt a deep inner glow. He struggled desperately for the means to gain Vulcan control. What was happening to him? He tried to shut out the powerful feelings coming from the Captain. It was impossible.

"You have given me a great gift this day," Kirk said. "I want you to know how much I appreciate it." His hold on Spock's wrist loosened as his weakness caught up with him. His hand slipped and his fingers caught at the Vulcan's.

Spock tensed as he felt the tingling at his fingertips. How was this happening? How was it possible for the friendship bond to begin to form? They had not declared any intent to be friends. He had not. *He had not.* There could be no such bond between Vulcan and Human. Could there? He felt the intensity of Kirk's stare and knew that he had felt it too.

"Spock?" Kirk murmured questioningly, not understanding but knowing that something unusual was taking place.

Spock was shaken, badly shaken. He was weak from his wounds, the shocks of the day, but most of all from the impossible happenings with Kirk. He quickly eased his fingers away and clasped his hands behind his back.

Kirk watched him intently, seeing the struggle going on in him. He could not pinpoint what it was that revealed it to him, for the Vulcan face was expressionless. He just knew. Damn this weakness. He had to know what had happened between them today. He felt a touch on his arm, and looked up to see the worried face of Gary Mitchell.

"Jim," Mitchell said. "Thank god you are all right."

Kirk nodded slightly. "No deity," he tried to say. Just the

special abilities of his remarkable Vulcan officer.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The effects of the drugs McCoy had administered began to make Kirk feel drowsy. He fought it, there was still so much to say to Spock. He tried to speak but his words came out in an inaudible whisper, so low that even Vulcan hearing could not discern it.

Spock knew the Captain had something further to say. He looked down into eyes which stared up at him in frustration. He could pretend he had not noticed and no-one would know, but that, for him, would be dishonourable. He dropped to one knee beside the bed and leaned his ear close to Kirk's mouth. This time he heard the Captain's words.

"You give me a gift beyond price."

Spock lifted his head and met Kirk's gaze. "I give you my loyalty, my personal loyalty, Captain, which is what you wanted. It is a commitment from me you will not regret. That I swear."

Kirk smiled delightedly, accepting the words of his First Officer. He reached out to touch his shoulder, and stared at him with pride and a certain wonder.

"I know," he said, finding his voice. "I have had cause to know it already."

Spock bowed his head. It was done. He had given this man his loyalty, and he would serve him to the best of his ability.

The silence around them was deafening. Everyone knew that something momentous had happened. Chapel's eyes were wet. Her admiration for Spock blossomed. How noble he was. It seemed to her, steeped as she was in the lore of ancient history, that Spock had given a vow reminiscent of a knight swearing homage to his king. She smiled at the analogy. She was not the only one to make it; Kirk, a passionate student of history, saw it too.

He stared at the dark, shining hair and felt a strange, almost ecstatic joy. He had reached a Vulcan on a level he had never thought possible, he had somehow forged a bond of loyalty with him. Spock's words had been a sacred vow. He knew such a thing had never happened before between Vulcan and Human, and did not quite know how to deal with such a situation.

The Vulcan looked up and met his Captain's sparkling eyes. He forced himself to retain the shreds of his dignity.

"Sir, you must allow the medical staff to tend you."

"As you must," Kirk replied.

"Yes, sir."

"We have much to discuss, Spock."

It was the thing Spock dreaded, but he knew it could be safely postponed for a time.

"Once you are recovered, sir."

"Yes," Kirk said with a smile. "I have many questions."

"Later," McCoy said gruffly. He could see the obvious good the Vulcan was doing for Jim, but he could not fathom out what he was doing.

"Captain, you are going to surgery. Mr. Spock, allow Dr. Piper to attend your injuries."

"You will answer my questions?" Kirk asked, ignoring the doctor.

"To the best of my ability," Spock replied.

Kirk let out a sigh. "Our blood has mixed together, this day."

Spock looked at Kirk's bare chest, seeing for the first time how much he had bled over him, how indeed the green and red blood had mixed. Slowly he stood and returned to where Piper awaited him. He sat down on the bed and watched as the Captain was taken into surgery, then looked down, concentrating inwards. He must strengthen his shields, there were cracks in them, dangerous cracks. He must erect new barriers, stronger ones, which would protect him against this highly emotional Human who had extracted the powerful Vulcan oath of loyalty from him.

He glanced up to see Mitchell standing there. "Yes, Mr. Mitchell?"

"Mr. Spock, thank you for what you did for Jim. He will never forget it."

"Indeed, Mr. Mitchell," he said tonelessly. "What is your purpose in sickbay?"

"I heard about Jim... I... "

"Return to duty."

"Yes, sir, but... " He hesitated, unsure of how to proceed with this strange officer, whom Jim admired so much.

"Continue," Spock said patiently.

Mitchell cleared his throat. "Jim is a man generous to the extreme with his love of friends. He expects, and gets it all returned to him. He thrives on the affection and admiration of the people under his command. You cannot supply that, despite your commitment of loyalty."

Spock beat down the wave of irritation he felt at Mitchell's words. "Do not discuss with me matters you know nothing of. Return to duty."

Mitchell turned on his heel and left.

Piper let out a low whistle. "I'd say he was jealous."

Spock was confused. "Jealous?"

Piper tried to explain. "A very Human emotion, sir. One we

would be better without."

"Explain."

"He is jealous of your being First Officer, of the Captain's admiration for you, of what just happened here."

"I fail to understand, Doctor."

Piper sighed. Why had he brought up the subject? "Did you not see the Captain's face when you gave him your loyalty? When he thanked you for saving his life? I don't know what happened down there on Athene 2, but I reckon you must have done something very special. Mitchell is still out of favour, and he fears that you will take his place as the Captain's confidant. You must have observed in your years in Starfleet that Humans confined in ships, even as large as this one, form very intense friendships. Men and women who face danger together, rely on one another, have always entered into such relationships."

"How illogical," Spock said. "If you are finished, I must file my report to Starfleet." Abruptly, he stood up. "Excuse me."

The doctor watched as he left sickbay. Who could understand Vulcans?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As Kirk recuperated from his ordeal he had many visitors. Mitchell came the most often, and they would laugh over the incidents in the years they had known one another. Kirk told Mitchell some of what had happened on Athene 2, and he praised Spock in glowing terms, but he did not speak of the many things he himself did not understand. Two days passed, and still Spock had not visited him. He wondered why, and got annoyed until he caught himself. He had to remember that he was not dealing with a Human; maybe Spock did not realise that Kirk wanted to see him. Perhaps Vulcans did not make social visits. He would call him. Mitchell leaned back when Kirk told him. He was getting sick of the Vulcan.

Kirk touched the intercom. "Bridge."

"Spock here," came the immediate reply.

"Mr. Spock, when will you be off duty?"

"29.75 minutes, sir."

"29.75 minutes," Kirk repeated with an amused glance at Mitchell. "Good, will you come down to sickbay and visit me?"

Spock blinked. Why would the Captain wish this? "You received my report?"

"Yes, I did."

"Is everything in order, sir?"

"Yes."

"Then I do not understand, sir."

Kirk sighed. Did he really not understand? Did he need it spelled out to him? Well, so be it. "Your Captain requests the pleasure of your company to play chess."

"Very well, sir," Spock replied after a moment. "I will be there as soon as possible. Spock out."

"I can play chess with you," Mitchell complained.

"I know, Gary, but he can beat the pants off Earth's finest grandmasters."

Mitchell stood. "I'll leave you to prepare for your match, then."

Kirk saw his annoyance. "What is it, Gary?" He knew that Gary had been making extra efforts since his reprimand, but he had also seen a certain resentment in him.

"Things have changed, Jim. You are not the young kid, the one who hung around me at the Academy, the one I protected against that bully, Finnegan. That kid is now my superior officer. I used to be the leader, Jim."

"I remember, Gary. You took a shy, awkward kid under your wing and helped him to find his feet."

Mitchell laughed. "Yes, I did."

Kirk sat up carefully, his wounds still troubling him. The alien microbes had not been totally destroyed, but McCoy had hopes that another few days of treatment should finish them.

"As a Starship Captain, I have the responsibility for over 400 people. A Captain must have his crew's respect. He must be someone they can trust. I must maintain a certain aura, Gary. I cannot appear to be weak or foolish. I must command their loyalty."

"What of Mr. Spock?"

"Ah," Kirk said with sudden realisation. "So that's it. Did his words of loyalty bother you? Do his capabilities frighten you? Is it his alienness which still upsets you?"

Mitchell did not answer.

"Gary, can't you see what it means to me to have the loyalty of a Vulcan?"

Mitchell felt aggrieved and angered, but he tried to keep it from showing. "He's not the only one who would give his life for you," he said.

Kirk sighed deeply, touched by his words. "I know that," he said gently. "You are my closest friend, you know that well. Jealousy does not become you, Gary."

A flush spread over Mitchell's face. "You can't have a friendship with a Vulcan, a being with no feelings."

"There is a first for all things. He is different with me. He did things for me on Athene 2, he... I saw certain things..." He trailed off unsurely. "He gave me a vow, here, in front of

witnesses, which gives me hope for something more from him."

Mitchell smiled a little. He had heard the talk all over the ship. Jim Kirk's estimation in the eyes of the crew had increased by an enormous leap because of the Vulcan's words.

"I think," he said, "if anyone can do it, you can. I must return to duty now. Mr. Spock does not approve of unpunctuality."

Kirk held out his hand. "Thanks for your visit."

With mixed feelings, Mitchell clasped his hand.

Spock went to his quarters to prepare for the visit to the Captain. He would be asked questions, the Captain would demand answers about the happenings on Athene 2, wanting a detailed report. He tried for calm. After long meditation he had been able to repair his shields, but he did not know whether they would hold against Kirk's powerful emotions. He remembered when the Captain had whispered those words of friendship to him. Why had they pierced him so deeply? Why, in sickbay, had he vowed his loyalty to Kirk? What had compelled him to do it? He had been loyal to Captain Pike, but that had been the loyalty and respect of a junior officer to a Captain with almost Vulcan reserve. It had grown over the years. With Kirk it had happened so quickly, with the Captain actively seeking his loyalty and friendship in his energetic, insistent way.

What Spock had given, he suddenly realised, was different. It went beyond First Officer to Captain, to a more personal vow from himself to Kirk. Immediately he dismissed the unbidden thought that he had irrevocably given his friendship as well. He must not allow himself to become attached to anyone. He was a Vulcan. It was the Vulcan way, to control and erase all emotion. He tried to relax for a time, attempting to renew the disciplines to further strengthen his shields. He spent many difficult minutes on it, but he was aware that it had been two hours since he had spoken with Kirk, he was overdue. He could not delay the meeting any longer. Taking a deep, relaxing breath, he made his way to sickbay.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Kirk began to worry when Spock had not arrived after more than an hour. He wondered whether to contact him again, but decided against it. The First Officer could have been caught up in anything. He tried to curb his impatience, but it was difficult. He wanted so many answers, had to know what had happened. He tried to read, but his thoughts kept returning to Athene 2; the horrifying deaths of his men, the attack of the alien Xan. He shuddered, but a moment later he remembered a warm and healing touch, and wondered anew about the abilities of Vulcans.

He heard the gentle hiss of the doors opening and looked up, smiling when he saw the Vulcan.

"Well, it's about time you got here."

Spock stood stiffly by the bed. "Sir, I regret I was delayed. I trust you are feeling better?"

Kirk grimaced. "Apart from weakness and discomfort, I am much improved. And you? Those alien bugs don't seem to have affected you."

"My immune system has disposed of them, sir. I am recovered."

"You had severe bruising."

"Healed, sir."

Kirk raised his eyebrow. "You heal fast. I wish I did."

He studied the Vulcan, noting the stiffness of his posture, the remote, austere expression on his face, so like the first time he had met him.

"So Starfleet have declared Athene 2 off limits."

"Indeed, sir. I recommended it. Our new orders are..."

"Yes," Kirk interrupted. "I have been keeping an eye on things. Spock, you're off duty now, may we talk of more personal matters?"

Spock steeled himself. He stared straight ahead.

"You saved my life and not only once. I owe you so much."

"You owe me nothing, sir. It was my duty."

Faced with this cold being, so unlike the one he knew existed, Kirk swore. Startled, Spock glanced at him for the first time.

"Was it also your duty to help me defeat the sheer horror of seeing my men torn to pieces? I don't know what you did, but when you touched me, I was able to overcome the worst of it. I could not have survived without you. You tell me you have no feelings, but I felt something from you. You did not have to do what you did... you chose to do it, and that is the difference." He sat up, anger showing plainly on his face now.

Spock stepped back a pace as the force of Kirk's feelings overwhelmed him. He tried to shut them out.

"When you carried me to shelter," Kirk continued. It was all becoming clear to him as he voiced it. "When you sat holding me, I felt the pain in me ease, the wounds did not bleed as much... I felt secure, even though I knew we were under attack, even though I was helpless. You were with me and protecting me and I had complete trust in you." His anger filtered away as these insights grew clearer. "I saw your every expression, I felt your determination to help me, your loyalty to me. I knew it was mine, even though you had not articulated it. I felt your fear that you were too late in getting me medical help... then when you put me on the sickbay bed, I realised just how much you had controlled my pain, for the severity of it hit me again."

Spock stared at him in awe. How perceptive this Human was. How did he know all this? How had he sensed it? Much of it Spock himself had not realised. He bent his head, Kirk's emotions painful to him now.

"Spock, give me some answers. Dammit, I have a right to know."

The Vulcan did not speak, he was at a loss for words. There was nothing in his experience to assist him in this situation. All his years in Starfleet amongst Humans had not prepared him for the demands of this Captain who in his persistent, persuasive way, had reached beneath the stoic Vulcan front and had reached something which Spock had thought eliminated.

Kirk leaned back wearily against his pillows. He closed his eyes. Why would Spock not tell him what had happened? He fought back the weakness which engulfed him. He felt the sting of tears behind his eyelids and moaned slightly as a surge of despair swept through him. Damn the Vulcan... what more could he say to him?

The indicators had not changed, Spock noted, but the Captain appeared to be in distress. He unclasped one hand from behind his back and hesitatingly touched Kirk's shoulder. "Captain, are you all right?" he asked.

Kirk drew in a sharp breath at the touch. Something was flowing from the Vulcan's hands right through his skin.

"I was right!" he exclaimed in wonder. "You have healing in your hands."

Spock's expression changed. He jerked his hand away. How was the Captain feeling this? He drew inwards, trying to focus on his powers. He knew he had a certain natural healing gift. It was inherent in his father's family. His father's mother was a renowned healer on Vulcan, and it had been she who had taught him the basic skills. She had wished him to follow her path but he, with his difficulty with his Human traits, had been afraid to make healing his life's work. It entailed levels of personal contact which would surely have revealed those despised Human attributes he fought to contain. Yet, although he had never used the healing skills, somehow they had spontaneously helped his Captain.

Kirk stared at the Vulcan with sympathy and understanding. "I'm sorry, Spock. I keep forgetting that you are not Human, that your beliefs are different. I must not try to force from you that which you will not give."

Spock noted with interest his change of attitude.

"Bones said that my worst wounds had begun to heal even before he did anything. I just feel such a sense of gratitude to you and I must admit, a certain amazement at this healing power of yours. Have you used it before?"

Spock took a deep breath. "Not to my knowledge, sir."

"Did you realise you were attempting to heal me?"

For a long moment, Spock stared out into space, then he met his Captain's eyes. "I did attempt to help you gain control when the men were being killed. I also tried at one point to initiate the control of bleeding and pain. I was not aware of it at any other time."

"But I felt it all the time, even then as you touched my shoulder."

Spock swallowed convulsively. Why was a spontaneous healing process happening? It was unheard of, certainly between different

species. It only occurred between family, or a friend who had become as family.

"Will you try it again?" Kirk asked him. "See if you are aware of it now?"

"Vulcans do not touch," Spock said in a vain attempt at argument.

Kirk bit back a choice word. What was he to do with his Science Officer? He held out his hand.

"Treat it as an experiment. You are a scientist, are you not? Don't you want to know?"

Spock bowed to the logic of the situation. He prepared himself, ignored the outstretched hand and once again touched Kirk's shoulder. Yes, he felt it now, a slight tendril of the healing power reaching into Kirk. He tried to control it but it had taken root and settled into the infection left by the alien claws. Slowly, it began to neutralise it.

The discomfort was easing now. Kirk stared up in wonder at Spock. He felt a warmth penetrate the deep lacerations and let out a shaky breath as the persistent, nagging ache disappeared. Spock studied the scanners. It had worked.

"The infection is gone, Captain. I am unsure of the actual procedure by which it happened. I am not trained in this."

"You did a pretty good job for someone who is untrained. I feel much better now."

The Vulcan lifted his hand away, and tightly clasped it in his other, behind his back, in an effort to control his trembling. How had this healing occurred?

"Thank you, my friend," Kirk said gratefully.

Spock stared at him. "I have told you, sir, that friendship is a sacred bond, not entered into lightly, and is unto death."

Kirk tried to hold back his anger. "Spock, don't deny that along with that loyalty, you gave me your friendship as well. I have offered you my friendship... No, it is yours whether you like it or not. We are drawn together, can't you see it? You cannot be that stubborn, you are highly perceptive, you are telepathic, you *must* see it." He paused to see if his passionate words had made any difference. He could not tell. "Don't lock yourself away from me. Remember what happened on Athene 2, remember what I said to you. I meant it, Spock, I will always be your friend. If friendship with you is a deep commitment unto death, then so be it. It's the type of friendship I have always wanted. I will be worthy of it. I badly need a friend here. I need the complete support you can give me. Please, Spock." He paused again, and smiled embarrassedly. "See how your Captain pleads with you."

The Vulcan made his decision. There was no other logical course. He had been compulsively drawn to this man. He could no longer deny it, nor prevent it. The signs had all been there, but he had refused to acknowledge them. His behaviour had been dishonourable. Jim Kirk was sincere, and he was worthy of friendship, even of the Vulcan kind.

He bowed his head. "Captain, I ask your forgiveness. I have been in error. You have seen the situation more clearly than I. The healing can only happen when a deep and abiding bond exists. I had given you my friendship, but had not consciously realised it. It is most peculiar."

Kirk listened to Spock's words with growing happiness. At last he was getting somewhere. He had persuaded the Vulcan that friendship existed between them, and he was beginning to realise that with a Vulcan, the rules of such a relationship were going to be very unusual and interesting indeed.

"I promise," he said, "that I won't embarrass you with displays of emotion, and I accept friendship from you on your terms. I won't make unreasonable Human demands on you."

Spock raised an eyebrow. He appreciated Kirk's words, but he wondered if the Human would be able to keep them. "It is said, sir, that two whose minds are as one will recognise one another. It is a saying I have never understood until now."

Kirk's face lit up with surprise. "It is a true saying, there are Human ones which are similar." He felt lightheaded... he felt as if he could take on the whole Klingon Empire. He grinned. "Sit down, Spock, please."

"Yes, sir," Spock said, and pulled over a stool. He sat straight, his hands clasped in front of him, trying to understand what had happened here.

"Jim," Kirk said. "Call me Jim."

"Yes, Captain."

"Spock, call me Jim."

"Yes, sir."

Frustrated but amused by his new found friend, Kirk said patiently, "Jim."

It was difficult for Spock. It did not seem correct to call his Captain by his first name.

"Can't you call me Jim, please?"

Spock swallowed. He tried to sound out the single syllable of the name. Kirk smiled encouragingly. "Jim," he prompted.

Spock gazed at him uncomfortably. It went against all his Vulcan training in respect for a person of superior rank.

"JIM!" Kirk demanded. "That is an order."

"Jim," Spock said quickly.

Delightedly, Kirk laughed, and once again Spock could not understand why his Captain got such pleasure out of his words. Why should he be so pleased to be called Jim? Would he ever understand Humans? Would he ever understand this particular Human?

"Thank you," Kirk said. "I don't want you to be formal with me all the time."

"Yes, Captain," Spock said.

Kirk stared pointedly at him.

"Jim," Spock mumbled.

"I didn't hear you, Spock," Kirk said, trying to keep from smiling.

"Jim," Spock said with resignation in his tone.

Kirk smiled widely.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

McCoy came in to check on his patient and was amazed to find such an improvement in him. The infection had totally cleared, and he had found Jim in such cheerful spirits, with Mr. Spock sitting quietly by his bedside. The Vulcan's presence seemed to be of benefit to Jim, and McCoy did not understand it. To him, the Science Officer seemed completely aloof, disinterested and cold, yet Jim seemed to bask in his company. He remembered how he had watched, startled, as the Vulcan had given his loyalty with such intensity, and how delightedly Jim had received it. Later, Jim had told him of the events on the planet, and McCoy had also been impressed by the First Officer's actions. Jim certainly was, and Jim was an excellent judge of character. McCoy wondered if he had been so completely wrong about the Vulcan. He decided that he would try harder to get to know him.

"You wished to play chess," Spock said, once the doctor had left.

Jim grinned sheepishly. "It was just to get you here. I want to talk."

"As you wish, Captain."

"Jim," Kirk reminded.

"Jim," Spock said, realising that it was not as difficult to say now. Kirk nodded in approval, then became serious.

"I keep thinking of my men. I feel there must have been some way I could have helped them." He looked at Spock, troubled.

"There was nothing you could do. We were outnumbered. They were much stronger than us. You cannot allow yourself to dwell on it. You have responsibility to your crew. All Starfleet personnel know the risks, all accept them."

"But Spock, try for a moment to feel. They were eaten alive..." He shuddered. "Surely, even a Vulcan..."

"Captain, even a Vulcan is horrified by such a barbaric death, but one must set aside such feeling. You may mourn the deaths of the men, but you must not allow your grief to overcome you. You must not feel guilt, for you are blameless. If you do not set aside your feelings you will not be able to function as Captain of this Starship."

"I'm sorry," Kirk said, realising he had misjudged him. He should know Spock's feelings more than anyone. "You are correct, of course. I just needed you to remind me of such things."

"That is my duty."

"Just your duty?" Kirk asked inquiringly.

"My... " Spock hesitated. "My privilege."

Kirk stared at him and Spock looked away. There were too many times he was unable to face his Captain's gaze, and this was a new experience for him. He was exhausted, he suddenly realised. He had not slept in days, and meditation alone was not enough. The talk with Kirk was draining him in a way he did not understand, and he felt the need to be alone, to gather his thoughts.

"Thank you, Spock," Kirk said, and the sincerity of his tone forced the Vulcan to face him again.

Spock studied him silently, noting that this Human never flinched from him, could always look him in the eye, and he got the distinct impression that Kirk understood him. Surely that was impossible. The Captain was not empathic or telepathic.

He stood up. "You are fatigued. I will leave you to rest."

Kirk began to protest. Fatigued! He felt better than he had done for days, but he stopped himself, suddenly realising that perhaps Spock wished to leave for his own reasons.

He held out his hand, then remembered. "Oh, forgive me," he said, lowering his hand to his side. He had to comply with Spock's traditions, and shaking hands was certainly not one of them.

Spock raised his hand in the salute Kirk had seen him make to M'dorn. "This is the Vulcan equivalent of the Human handshake. Can you do this?"

It looked easy, but was surprisingly difficult, and a little painful. Kirk did manage it... almost.

"Vulcans do not normally touch, but between friends, a touch is permissible."

Jim stared up at him, unsure of what he was going to do. He swallowed, determined to go through with it, whatever it was.

"You were aware of the slight tingle when we touched before?" Spock asked.

"Yes, I wondered what it was."

"It was the joining of the Vulcan friendship bond," Spock said. It was time to be honest with his Captain. "Like the healing, it happened spontaneously. I should not have resisted it. I ask your forgiveness for that. It was a dishonourable thing to do. If you wish, we may complete it now. It will be the seal on our friendship, never to be broken."

"I am ready," Kirk said unhesitatingly. This was what he had been fighting for... the friendship of a lifetime, with this mysterious but dependable Vulcan.

Spock touched his fingertips to Kirk's, and this time the sensation went through the Human's hand and arm.

"I am, and always shall be, your friend," Spock said, intoning the ritual words.

His gaze bored into Kirk's, but the Human met it with his own, knowing that something very special was happening, something which could affect him for the rest of his life.

"I am and always shall be your friend," he repeated solemnly. *Like a vow*, he reflected. It was a vow... one he knew would never be severed.

Spock bowed his head. "It is done."

He carefully broke the contact, and the tingling sensation faded, leaving a slight numbness.

Kirk looked down at his hand, wondering what had happened during that contact. He did not know that according to Vulcan law, he would now be considered a member of Spock's family, an honorary son to Sarek and Amanda, a brother to Spock.

"The Human handshake is nothing compared to that," Kirk said.

"Each species has its own customs," Spock said. "I am half Human. I will shake your hand if you wish it."

"You would not mind?"

"You have the right to ask it of me."

Kirk smiled, held out his hand and Spock took it in his warm, powerful grip, careful not to put the kind of pressure on it that would cause a Human pain.

"We will be the best Captain and First Officer in Starfleet," Kirk said with conviction. "I know it."

"Indeed, Jim," Spock said, making Kirk chuckle happily to hear Spock call him by his first name without prompting.

Spock knew that if this new found friendship developed, with the rapport between them growing with their knowledge of one another, as it should, then they would indeed be a highly effective team. There was, however, the random factor of the Captain's unpredictable Humanness. He did not know how that would fit into the situation. He would have to wait and observe.

Captain James T. Kirk reflected on the events of the past months and for the first time began to relax with his command. He knew that everything had now fallen into place. He was prepared for his long five year mission with his beautiful ship, his fine crew and this extraordinary First Officer by his side. He was confident now, all his doubts and fears about his competency, his fitness were gone. He felt the secure handclasp of the Vulcan, and he knew that he could rely on him completely in all things. He trusted him above all others. He would never be alone again.

His feelings flowed through the contact, causing Spock instinctively to draw back. Kirk sighed, unaware of how much he had been read, but he noted the Vulcan's intense stare.

"I fear I am something of a trial for you, Spock," he said apologetically.

Clasping his hands behind his back, Spock replied, "Indeed, Captain."

Kirk laughed. "I'm sorry... it is the way I am."

"Very well, sir, but I must leave you to rest now."

"I am much better now since you have been here."

Spock bowed his head. "I am honoured, sir."

"Return soon," Kirk said. "Your company is very therapeutic for me."

"I will," Spock replied. "It is my privilege to be your friend; I will be here whenever you need me."

A smile lit up Jim's face. "It is also my privilege to be your friend. I know how lucky I am."

"I do not believe in luck."

"There we must differ," Kirk said. "But there will be plenty of time to debate such issues. I look forward to them."

"Yes, Captain."

"JIM!"

"Jim," Spock repeated.

He had to leave this place before his shields cracked completely. He had much to consider. Before Kirk could say more, he quickly took his leave.

A moment later, McCoy came in. "Now he's gone, Jim, I want to..."

To his complete surprise he was grabbed around the neck by his patient and pulled into a tight hug. He spluttered with embarrassment and laughed.

"Hey... what did I do to deserve this?"

Kirk held him back, his face wreathed in smiles. McCoy had never seen him so happy.

"I just feel so good, Bones," Kirk said.

"What has that Vulcan done?" McCoy asked suspiciously. "It was him, wasn't it?"

Kirk became serious. "He has given me his friendship."

"His friendship!" McCoy exclaimed. "Vulcans know nothing of friendship, cold-blooded, emotionless, disdainful, superior..."

"Bones, we have exchanged a vow of friendship," Kirk interrupted. "I'm unsure what it means to him, I don't understand it fully, but he is committed to me. He is my friend."

McCoy shook his head. "Jim, only you could do it; reach an ice-cold Vulcan and make him your friend."

Kirk leaned back against the pillows. He was content now to rest and heal. He knew that under his command the Starship Enterprise would be the finest ship in the history of Starfleet. Her fame would live forever...